

To
Miss Margaret Marks

THE
TEMPTATIONS
OF HERCULE

by

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author of
"Hercule and the Gods"

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CHAPTER I

I

'You will be late, M'sieu,' said Hercule to me, as he pulled out an immense silver watch and peered at the dial.

He was about to continue, when suddenly an expression of consternation dawned on his face. He ran to the side of the platform and stared at the station clock. Again he looked at his watch. Then he came back to where I waited, his face crestfallen.

'It has stopped,' he announced.

I waited sympathetically. One could see that this was a major catastrophe.

'It is this watch that the company presented to me many years ago,' he went on. 'At the time I can remember how I was disappointed, for I considered that my bravery and my intelligence, to say nothing of my initiative and my resource, not to mention the money I saved them, merited at least a gold case. But since then I have altered my opinion—those officials know how to get their money's worth—to a *centime*. Look at the work I do—and look at the wage they pay me.'

'They gave me a watch, in a silver case, it is true—but what a watch—for ten years it has never gained—never lost—never stopped. Ah—I should like to meet the man who made that watch. He must have been an artist at his trade, like I am in mine.'

His features glowed with enthusiasm. Then suddenly he remembered, and it was as if a light behind them were extinguished.

'But now—it has stopped.'

I gave him a cigarette.

'Listen, Hercule,' I began, 'if your friend Robert drove his engine for ten years—or even for one year—or part of a year, and never used his oil-can—what would happen?'

He looked up at me, pleased that he knew the answer.

'Why, M'sieu, the bearings would get hot—and hotter—and hotter—and then one fine day, when Robert was going downhill, in the way that he does, like a devil out of hell—*crata-pata-paque*—he would have no more engine.'

'Exactly,' I replied. 'In your watch there are wheels which turn on pivots, and those pivots need oil.'

He stared at me.

'Well—to think of that—I never realised such a thing. To me it was just a watch. On it I looked at the time. How it all worked was beyond my comprehension. Imagine that—I have always said that you were a man of considerable intelligence.'

He grinned at me cheerfully.

'I can see that I must ask Robert for the loan of his oil can.'

'You had better let me have it—I will get it put right for you.'

'You are very kind, M'sieu.'

I was about to ask him how he had come by the watch when suddenly I had a better idea. The stories which Hercule told me at the station were so remarkable that I concluded that an evening spent in taking him out to dinner might be expensive, but would at least prove interesting.

Incidentally it turned out to be both, particularly the former.

'Not at all,' I told him. 'I am going to the right place—I will have it cleaned for you. Then, when I come

back next week, it will give me great pleasure if you will dine with me, and then you can tell me why they presented you with such a fine watch.'

2

Hercule eyed me solemnly over the rim of his glass.

' In a way you might say that it all began with this watch—if they had not been grateful they would not have kept me on driving for a week after the strike, and they would not have allowed me to alter my run, and then I would never have seen the Mona Lisa, nor ended up with Jules and his car—but I am beginning at the wrong end—this is a very excellent wine you have chosen, M'sieu. I congratulate you.'

I refilled his glass. Again he eyed me solemnly as he drank.

' I will tell you of the time when I actually had a fortune in my hands.'

' A fortune ? ' I repeated.

' Yes—a picture worth thousands of francs—hundreds of thousands of francs—thousands—well, anyway, it was worth a fortune,' he concluded, almost defiantly.

' But—'

He raised his glass again with a knowing air.

' Quite right. You ask where is that fortune today. You are right. It is a good question—you are a man, as I have remarked before, of considerable intelligence. Alas—I no longer have that picture. If I had—I should not be sitting here, allowing you, M'sieu, to pay for this most excellent dinner.

But fate has been unkind to me. Throughout my life I have been pursued, as it were, by a malicious mischance. My best efforts have always failed. Several times have I

been within a *centimetre* of gaining a great fortune—only to lose it at the last moment.'

I thought he was about to weep. It was, I believe, his third bottle, and I was prepared for anything. But suddenly he set his glass down and began to eat bread with a great and solemn deliberation.

'Another, and weaker man, might cry out against such continual hardship, and bemoan the fact that he was unlucky. Another, and lesser man, might rile against the injustice of the gods. But not Hercule. I do not admit such a thing.'

On the contrary—every day I bless my good fortune—the fact that I am alive, that I am in good health, that I sleep like a child, and that my thirst, if an expense, is at least never a disappointment. But then, you see, M'sieu—I am a philosopher. I have vision, and the ability to contemplate life dispassionately.

Obviously, I say to myself, I am not destined to become rich. Probably fate knows what is best for me—better than I do. At least, I sincerely hope so.

But what was I saying? Oh yes—about the watch.

3

It was at the time of the great strike, when all the station was in a ferment, what with a picket of *gendarmes* on the platforms, and most of my friends throwing bricks at them, and the *gendarmes* longing to hurl them back, and shouting insults and abuse instead to provoke them so that they could use their batons and thus get a little of their own back—you never saw such a scene of confusion in your life.

And in the middle of it all there we were—trying to run a skeleton service. Believe me—it was a task to make a Napoleon despair. And *Madame La Compagnie* had no

Napoleon on her books—only Blanchard, the fat Traffic Manager. Tee-hee—even now if you say strike to him he breaks out in perspiration. He must have lost about a *kilo* a day.

But I see that you are looking puzzled, M'sieu. You are asking yourself—if there was a strike, why was Hercule not one of the strikers? Quite right—it is a fair question.

But even in those days, M'sieu, a little of my philosophy had already been forced, by the brutality of life, into my system.

I argued logically, as is my nature. I reasoned to myself thus. The strike was fully justified. The pay of the railwaymen was about enough to keep them in cigarettes. Even for me, with my simple tastes, it was shamefully inadequate. But these things, I said to myself, are in the hands of *le bon Dieu*. I was, and still am a fatalist.

Of what use was a strike? I had seen strikes before. I knew. I knew that the strikers always had to come back to work in the end, that the bosses always won, because the bosses always have the money, and they can afford to wait. For a man with a wife and children it is more difficult. It is the way of the world—as we have made it today. The bosses sit on top of it, because they have the money, and money rules the world.

We are given the privilege of working for them, of producing goods for them. They pay us wages, so that we can buy some of the goods we make, and give them the profit. Then we can make more goods, and they can make more profit. Ah—what a vicious circle—it has neither beginning nor end. Its shape is so perfect—but it stinks to high heaven.

But in the meantime the strikers have to live. And I had no money saved. I could not afford to strike.

And besides, I said to myself, why should I strike? The others were striking for me. If there were any conces-

sions to be gained, any increase of pay granted, they would obtain them for me, and I would be grateful. So I let them strike, and wished them from the bottom of my heart, good luck.

But for my part, I arrived at the station each day, and drew my pay, such as it was, at the end of the week, with thankfulness, for although it was small, it was better than nothing.

Well, on the third day, I had shouldered my hammer, and was about to begin tapping wheels, when the Traffic Manager, old fat Blanchard, sent for me to come into his office.

"Hercule," he said, "I have turned up your record-card. It appears that once you were a driver?"

I flushed with pride.

"Yes, M'sieu," I told him, "and although I say it and you do not—a good one too. Indeed, were it not that I am a man of singularly modest disposition—"

He peered at the card like a fat and pompous pig and rudely interrupted me.

"That is not exactly what it says here—but never mind—we need every man now. We must keep some trains running. We are going to put you on the fast goods to the coast tomorrow. Take this card to the Line Manager."

M'sieu—I was a proud man as I left that office. For if they made me drive a train, they would have to give me a driver's pay, and if I had listened to my friends, I should have had no pay at all.

Sometimes in this life it is better to follow one's conscience, and not the advice of one's friends.

4

Tee-hee—that was a train, M'sieu—that fast goods. Every morning I left a quarter of an hour after Robert, and I arrived at the coast some forty minutes after the express. That was not bad driving, considering the weight of that train—*tonnerre de Brest*—they loaded it all night until it was three trains all in one.

It was a wonder the couplings held—and they could only allow me one engine, because there were not enough men.

Robert was still driving, because he had a wife and three children, and whatever pay he drew, nine-tenths of it remained in his possession for five minutes—which was exactly the time it took him to get home to his wife. So it did not really matter to him what he earned. As driver of the crack express he naturally kept his train going to schedule.

I had no schedule. I just followed him, and they left his signals down and kept the line clear until I had passed. But it was a point of honour with me to show them what I could do—what kind of a driver they compelled to tap wheels—and when I arrived on the first day, Robert was so astonished that he bought me a drink.'

Between two large mouthfuls of bread Hercule smiled reminiscently.

'I think I did more damage to that track in the week I drove than six months' normal wear—but that was not my fault. I drew a driver's pay, and—*nom de bleu*—I earned it. I kept that train on the rails and around the corners, and downhill I used to pray—and I am not what you would call a particularly religious man.

5

A few nights later I was in the *café* by the station, celebrating my success in a decent and restrained manner, when Jou-Jou the Rat walked in.

More—he sat down at my table, without invitation. And he bought me a drink—a large one.

Now as you know, M'sieu, it is always pleasant to be able to drink at another man's expense, but I do not think I have ever enjoyed a drink for which Jou-Jou had paid.

In the first place, he never bought you a drink unless he wanted something from you ; secondly, what he wanted from you was bound to get you into trouble, and thirdly, while you were drinking it, as if these two thoughts were not enough to spoil its taste, he would stare at you unwinkingly with those black and beady eyes of his until sometimes it seemed as if you were drinking vinegar.

"Congratulations, Hercule," he rasped. "I hear you are now a driver once more."

"I am—but how did you know?" I replied.

"I know everything. I make it my business to find out. Finish your drink. Have another. I also know that tomorrow there is a shipment of gold to the coast."

I stared.

"Well—that is something I did not know."

He watched me until I felt a chill creeping down my spine.

"That is strange, Hercule—very strange. I was certain you knew. In fact, I was going to ask you in which train it is going," he said softly.

I finished my drink. I was glad of it.

"Have another," invited Jou-Jou. "Your memory seems to need lubricating—you are getting old."

"Thank you," I replied with dignity, for a drink is a

drink, with whatever insult it is proferred. But my active brain was not idle.

"Listen, Jou-Jou," I said. "Even if you are so kind and generous, I cannot tell you what I do not know myself. I can only tell you one thing—which everyone knows, that Robert's train is now the only express we have to the coast each day. You know, I presume, that we have a strike on?"

He scowled.

"Yes—I know that all true comrades are demanding their rights—but you still seem to be working. Perhaps you are satisfied with the condition of the world's workers—you will shortly retire, I suppose, and invest your savings, and live like a *rentier*, no doubt," he sneered.

I drank his third drink with all the dignity I could summon. Unfortunately, he had made me so nervous with all his talk about gold and his threats and his sarcasm, that I spilt most of it down my shirt. Then I answered him.

"What other people choose to do is their affair. I am a conscientious man, and I cannot afford to strike. I need the money, such as it is. I earn it fairly in return."

And still with dignity I rose to my feet. Again the effect was marred, because he thrust a claw-like hand in my belt and pulled me down again.

"Sit down," he rasped. "I am not here to discuss your morals or your principles. Answer me. When they load bullion, the sealed van is run into the station first, is it not, loaded there from the bank lorries at the back of the platform, and then coupled on to the end of the train. Is that right?"

One hand went round to his hip-pocket. I glanced around the *café*, but as usual when Jou-Jou was there, it was deserted. I sighed. I knew what he kept in that pocket. There was nothing I could do, except answer him. After all, what he had asked me was common knowledge.

"Yes," I replied.

"Good—I just wanted to make sure."

And he stood up.

"And I also know that you take out the fast goods a quarter of an hour after the express, and that you have been making some very fast runs to the coast—toadying to the big bellies your masters, I suppose. Well, tomorrow you had better not hurry quite so much, if you know what is good for you."

And then he went out.

6

What a man, that Jou-Jou—the very incarnation of wickedness. If I have any grey hairs it is due to him.

He knew that I would not dare to go to the police. He knew the terror his knife inspired in me. He knew that whatever happened to him, if it were my fault, his gang would settle with me.

But even as he spoke to me in the *café* my active brain had conceived a plan. That was at least one thing I had gained from long association with that Rat—to use my wits, as quickly and more quickly than him.

I did not dare to inform the police, as I have said, but I rushed off as fast as I could to the house of the Traffic Manager, and kept my finger on the bell until he came to the door in his nightshirt. He was very sleepy, and very angry at being thus disturbed.

But I did not waste time.

I told him of the plot. I told him that Jou-Jou knew of the gold. I unfolded my plan—to have two bullion vans, to couple an empty one to the express and the gold to the fast goods—a plan so simple and yet so brilliant that it was bound to succeed—and what did I get in return, M'sieu?

It makes me weep to think of how that man answered me.

"You have been drinking, Hercule," he said pompously. "Your breath is a disgrace. Even your shirt is soaking with liquor. Go and sleep it off—and see that you are not late for your work."

And he slammed the door in my face. There were times when I sympathised with the strikers.

7

The next day Robert set off on time, with the sealed van of bullion coupled on behind. Fat Blanchard was there, with a couple of *gendarmes*, looking like a self-satisfied pig, and as the train glided out he looked across at me and shook his head in a reproving manner.

What with my anxiety for my poor friend Robert and my righteous indignation at such smug injustice, I could have wept. Naturally nothing had happened in the station. I never expected that it would. Jou-Jou was far too cunning for that.

When Robert had gone I crossed the line and climbed up into the cab of my engine. The trucks were already loaded, and a quarter of an hour later I touched the regulator.

Outside the station the engine swung over the points and we joined the main line.

Jou-Jou had warned me not to hurry, but I pulled the regulator hard over as far as it would go, and drove my fireman like a slave, to get more steam. You see, M'sieu—my love for my friend Robert was greater than my fear of Jou-Jou, and Hercule is not the man to leave a friend in the lurch. If anything happened to that gold—as it would happen now that they had rejected my plan—Robert would be held responsible.

We roared between the low walls, and flashed through the suburbs, gathering speed every moment, for the track was level.

Outside the city, past Billancourt, there was a downgrade, and soon the cab was leaping like a live thing beneath our feet. I think there was only one thing which kept us on the rails, and that was the weight of the trucks behind.

I peered out over the side, alert for the signals, for to pull up would require time.

Well, for half an hour we made as good speed as Robert, or even better, I am sure—and he is an ace. There were two gradients, but I knew them both, and we rushed them at full speed. Then there came a long straight stretch, with a very slight downgrade.

Far ahead I saw something on the line. It looked like a cart full of hay, driven up along some track from a farm. I tugged at the whistle, and kept it blowing.

"Kind of an animal," I growled to my fireman. "Is he asleep? Does he expect me to drive around him?"

The cart did not move. And then I saw that there was no sign of any driver—and we were getting nearer and nearer.

I shut off steam, pulled over the air-brake, and bawled to my fireman, who jumped to the wheel-brake.

And then, suddenly, I remembered Jou-Jou, and I thought of my unfortunate friend Robert, at his mercy somewhere further up the line. This must be the work of that evil Rat, I thought—trying to make sure that I did not hurry.

With me, such is my lightning perception, to think is to act. I released the brake, pushed the fireman to one side, and opened the regulator wide.

The train seemed to leap forward down the incline. I shut my eyes and yelled to the fireman to hold on.

There was a crash, the engine rocked and swayed, and the air seemed full of hay. Then we were roaring on once again at full speed.

And that was the end of Jou-Jou's cart.

8

A few *kilometres* further on the line curved, and then there was another straight stretch, along which stood a signal cabin, which controlled a branch line.

As we rocked around the curve I shut off steam and applied the brake, for there, far in front of us, I could see Robert's train. The engine was drawn up beside the cabin, and the signal was at danger.

Slowing down rapidly, we drew nearer. I hung out of the side of the cab. Even as I watched, a puff of smoke shot up from the engine, and the train began to draw away.

But the bullion van on the end did not move.

Already several men were swarming around it like flies. One had a pickaxe with which he was battering on the sealed door. I pulled again on the brake.

On the branch line a light engine with one truck was waiting. In it Jou-Jou would make off with the gold. Ah—he was a cunning one, that Rat. The sunlight gleamed on something sticking out of the cabin window. It was the barrel of a rifle.

Poor Robert—he did well to obey.

And then, like a flash of lightning, my fertile brain saw the only way out. I released the brake and tugged at the regulator.

The heavy train gathered speed. We crashed into the buffers of that bullion van with a shock which nearly threw us out of the cab. But the weight of all that gold kept it on the rails.

I had a vision of Jou-Jou's gang, scattering like terrified rabbits, and a bullet flattened itself on the iron roof.

I gave the engine more steam, and soon I caught up with Robert, who had stopped his train and was in the middle of a heated discussion with the guard.

I explained everything. I removed my false beard and glasses and allowed my friend Robert to embrace me. After which I put them on again.

You see, my fireman had told everyone that I was ill in bed—with a man like Jou-Jou one cannot be too careful.

The guard patted me on the back. We coupled the van and the two trains together and came safely to the coast.

9

Madame La Compagnie was grateful. It is not often that she is grateful, I might tell you, but on this occasion there could be no doubt. They presented me with this watch. It is a fine watch—and a fine inscription. See here, M'sieu—on the back—"With the humble Apologies of Alfred Blanchard, Traffic Manager."

Every time I look at that inscription it gladdens my heart.

"Did he really put that on?" I asked.

Hercule's smile became incredibly sly.

"No, M'sieu—I had to put it on myself. But he knew that it was there—I showed it to him whenever I saw him. And he knew that I knew that it was true—or else why did they give me the watch?"

CHAPTER II

I

'WELL, that was the situation M'sieu. For a time I could do nothing wrong. I was Hercule, the man who had saved the bullion van—the man who, by his courage and his perspicacity, had outwitted and circumvented the dastardly machinations of that evil *apache*.

Of course, no one knew that Jou-Jou had actually engineered the plot, and I was not going to tell them, but for me it was a point of honour, not only to have outwitted him, but also to have escaped the inevitable consequences.

I said for a time, you will notice.

Alas—people's memories are incredibly short, and the fact that a man is grateful today is no guarantee how he will feel in a week's time.

Naturally, I did my best to keep the torch of my heroic exploit burning as brightly as possible. On every occasion I would check that the station clock was not advancing or retarding. Whenever I saw Blanchard I would tell him the time. And every day I would inquire in a loud voice of all the people I met whether any gold was expected that day—but alas, there were other and more important matters to claim people's attention.

The world went on. Men died and made news, and things happened. It was apparent to me that Hercule would have to swim with the tide. The Hercule who had saved the bullion van was dead, in that it had already happened. The Hercule who mattered was the one who was living at the time, for the present is the only thing of importance.

Within a week the strike was over, But for a few more days they kept me on the fast goods. That was their grati-

tude. The fact that the regular driver had been clapped in gaol for stealing a loaf of bread for his children may have influenced their decision, but Hercule is not the man to argue, or set himself up in authority against the wisdom of his employers. The difference between the pay envelope of a driver and that of a wheel tapper may not be gigantic, but it was sufficient to interest me.

Thus the next link in the chain was forged.

I was in the *café*, treating myself to a bottle of wine. All my life I have kept on good terms with myself—why not? *Le papa Dieu* created man half god and half beast—why not pay one's respect to the god and make friends with the beast? After all, they are both necessary. They both exist, side by side . . . which is a very strange thing. But I am forgetting.

Deep in the midst of my philosophical meditations at that table, I was rudely awakened by the appearance of Jou-Jou the Rat. And what was more, by Jou-Jou in a bad temper.

Now of all the fearsome sights in this wicked world, M'sieu, that of an *apache* such as Jou-Jou in a bad temper is surely one of the worst. Without a word he banged a chair down opposite me, seized the bottle for which I had paid, and without so much as asking my permission, placed the neck in his mouth, tilted his head back, and swallowed its contents.

The fact that I had nearly finished it before he came in did nothing to detract from the gloom of my thoughts. Was it for this that our grandfathers had erected the barricades and that the gutters had run with good blood—that all men should be citizens of *La République* and equal in their fraternity? Was it for this? Assuredly not.

But I confined my gloom to my thoughts. To have translated my tenebrous impulses into actions would have been to court disaster. I knew of that evil shining knife

which Jou-Jou kept in his hip pocket—I knew of his uncanny skill and his total absence of principle—and therefore I kept quiet.

I did more.

"Good evening, Jou-Jou," I said. "Have a drink?"

Such delicate sarcasm was of course completely wasted on one of his crude mental equipment, but it relieved my feelings. Indeed, it was all that I could do.

I could have demanded satisfaction. But I had doubts of obtaining it with a knife protruding from my belly. I could have asked *le patron* to summon the police—but when they came I knew that I would no longer be there. And when they found me, stinking in a sewer behind La Madeleine, what could I tell them?

It was indeed a situation which grated on my scrupulous sense of justice, but the bitterness of this brutal world has at least taught me wisdom.

"*Salut, Hercule,*" he growled. "Are you better?"

"Me—oh yes. Yes, thank you—I am quite better."

"It was fortunate for you that you were ill that day last week," he continued. "If I knew the name of that *crapule* who replaced you I would—I would——"

"Would what?"

"I would slit open his belly, pull out his guts and chop them into small pieces—I would make *nouilles* of that macaroni—I would——"

I shuddered at the cold ferocity in his voice, but I tried to keep my own normal. It would not do to let that evil man see how much he terrified me.

"Yes," I interrupted. "That was unfortunate. Robert told me how your plan was no good——"

I jumped nearly out of my trousers as Jou-Jou banged on the table.

"No good—no good? *Imbécile*—there was nothing wrong with that plan. It was a master plan—it was one

of my best plans. Just because some misbegotten son of a pig stuck his snout into it and spoilt it all—that does not mean it was not an excellent plan. *Patron*—bring us a bottle of wine."

I wondered to where all this was leading. I did not have to wonder for very long.

"Indeed, friend Hercule—it was such a good plan that I am going to try it again—or at least, something very similar," he went on softly. "And this time you are going to help me."

"Am I?"

"Oh yes. This time you are not going to be ill, friend Hercule. Indeed—I should strongly advise you to feel very well tomorrow morning. You see, I am not a patient man. Maybe you know that. I have many excellent qualities, but patience is not one of them. And if my beautiful plan happened to be ruined for the second time by a stupid fool—why then, I should be very angry and impatient. Maybe more angry than impatient. Go on—drink."

I sighed. I emptied the glass he had set before me, grasped the bottle and refilled it, and emptied it again. At least, I had now drunk all that I had paid for. Then I sighed again. Always my life became complicated and filled with the dark shadow of fear, whenever that evil Rat obtruded his way into it.

"I see," I told him. "I understand. Tomorrow I must not be ill. Tomorrow I am going to help you. Tomorrow you are repeating your excellent plan, which this time is going to succeed, because you have enlisted the help of Hercule, and when Hercule does a job, whatever that job may be——"

"Bah—you talk like an old washerwoman," rudely interrupted Jou-Jou. "Have another drink."

I ignored his incivility and drank. After all, for this I had not paid.

"And what is it that you are going to do tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," said Jou-Jou, "I am going to rob the Louvre."

2

To say that I was stupefied would be a gross understatement. I began to get up.

"Where are you going?" rasped Jou-Jou.

"To fetch a doctor," I told him.

"Sit down—*imbécile*. I told you I was going to rob the Louvre. Why then, should you fetch a doctor?"

"You must be mad. You had better go to bed, and rest."

"Fool. Ape. Lunatic. I am not mad. You are the one who will need a doctor if you do not stop talking like a fool—"

"But you cannot be serious," I interrupted him. "Rob the Louvre—in broad daylight—it is unheard of. It is impossible."

"That is just why I am going to succeed," replied Jou-Jou calmly, finishing the wine.

Such was my amazement when I saw that he was really in earnest that I overruled my better judgment and bought another bottle. After all, I argued to myself, there are pictures in the Louvre worth quite a considerable sum of money, and if Jou-Jou has a plan for stealing them, and if Hercule is to help in this plan—it was quite a pleasant train of thought—so pleasant indeed, that I paid the *patron* without more than a momentary qualm of remorse.

"Go on. Tell me," I said.

But Jou-Jou just looked at me with his beady black eyes and rasped his long fingers against the stubble on his blue jowl.

"No—I don't think so, friend Hercule," he said softly.

"I don't think I will tell you anything about that part of it. Too many times in the past have my schemes come to nothing—and curiously enough, it has been invariably whenever I have enlisted your help. I have not yet made up my mind whether you are a fool or a knave. But this is too important. All I will tell you is the part that concerns you."

I refilled his glass.

"But at least give me some idea," I pleaded. "Men have been trying for years—and no one has ever succeeded."

Jou-Jou drank and relented. Against such subtle flattery he was defenceless. Ah—for all his cunning and his ferocity, when it came to a battle of wits he was like a child compared with Hercule.

"Well, this time a man is going to succeed, and that man is Jou-Jou. Tomorrow a distinguished Italian nobleman and his suite are going on a tour of inspection at the Louvre. He has asked specially for one guide to be allotted to each member of his *entourage*—that should not leave them with many guides—bah, it is simple. Men at the entrance—men at the key points—one man to cut the telephone and alarms—it is all a matter of organisation. But you need not worry about that part of it, friend Hercule—indeed, the less you worry about it the better. I will tell you what you have to do—that is far more important. Are you listening?"

"Yes—I am listening."

"Good. Then pay attention—and leave that bottle alone. We are only taking a dozen pictures—they will be put in the back of a car, still in their frames to save time. That car will drive off as fast as it can go—but only as far as Seychelles."

"That is not very far," I put in.

"Of course it is not far, *imbécile*," retorted Jou-Jou.

" It is just outside the city. It seems to have escaped your intelligence that there will be a hue and cry for that car—the sooner we get rid of it the better. Seychelles is the first place where we can get a truck. You will find that truck, Hercule, on your line as you come up with the fast goods."

Jou-Jou paused and eyed me with an evil smile.

" Now take great care, friend Hercule, as you come up to that truck—for it will have inside it some very valuable pictures, and Michel will be inside the truck as well, busily engaged in cutting them out of their frames and rolling up the canvasses tightly and carefully.

" All you have to do, friend, Hercule, is to come up very gently to that truck—very gently indeed—and push it as far as the cutting by Ste. Ursanne. Michel should have finished by the time you arrive, and when you get there I will be waiting for you at the siding where we can get rid of the truck."

" And what will you do then? " I asked.

" I shall have a car there—not a stolen car, friend Hercule—a car in which I and the rightful owner can drive quietly and tranquilly away."

" You will be a very rich man? " I remarked thoughtfully. Jou-Jou's eyes never left mine, but his hand strayed round to his hip-pocket, as though he were feeling for a cigarette case.

" Perhaps I will, friend Hercule—perhaps I will," he rejoined softly. " But, mark you—they will be very difficult to dispose of. I shall have to wait quite a time until I find the right buyer. And all these men I am using—I have to pay each one. I shall have a very heavy capital outlay—very heavy indeed."

I said nothing. I was watching his hand, as if fascinated.

" So heavy, friend Hercule, that I shall actually find myself very short of cash—very short indeed."

"Not too short, I hope," I said boldly. "Not so short as to wreck this brilliant scheme."

"Oh no. I propose to pay you one hundred francs tomorrow at Ste. Ursanne when you have brought me that truck safely, and another five hundred when I have disposed of the first picture."

Well, that was fair enough, considering that my employer was Jou-Jou. I did not argue. We finished the bottle, and then I suddenly had a thought.

"You had better give me your telephone number," I said.

"Why?"

"I don't expect I shall need it—but you never know. Supposing something went wrong—and I could not get in touch with you?"

"But nothing is going wrong, friend Hercule," he said softly. "You are not going to be ill——"

"Oh no—nothing like that. But there are other things—unforeseen circumstances. It is as well to be prepared. It is a wise general who has an alternative plan, to meet every eventuality."

"Perhaps you are right."

He jotted down a number on an envelope.

"I shall be there until ten o'clock when I leave for the Louvre. If you want me, telephone before that time."

3

Now you may have the impression, M'sieu, that I left that *café* in a spirit of satisfaction and content. After all, it is not every day that one is presented with the opportunity of earning six hundred francs so easily.

Well, so I did—but that mood did not last five minutes. Before I had reached home my active brain was already scheming, and it was a long time before I finally fell

asleep. You may wonder what it was that kept me awake.

The truth of the matter is, M'sieu, that I was tempted. Temptation gripped me in its wicked claws, and I was as helpless as a rabbit in the coils of a snake—I admit that no one has ever seen a snake with claws, but as one gentleman to another, you will understand what I mean. Before an onslaught of such incredible ferocity, I was powerless.

Here was I, the man on whom the success or failure of the whole plan hinged—here was I, due to receive the sum of six hundred francs. It was out of proportion. It was more ; it was ridiculous. Here were pictures worth hundreds of thousands of francs being stolen, and I—Hercule—the man who was to push that gigantic fortune all the way to Ste. Ursanne, would be presented with six hundred francs.

My blood, even in the darkness of that miserable and draughty room in which an unkind fate had compelled me to live, began to boil. It was monstrous. It was unjust. It was *inoui*.

Clearly something had to be done about it.

Ah—but what ? That was the problem.

In the end, when at last I fell asleep, I had not arrived at any solution. In the morning it was no better. To add to my misery it was pouring with rain.

By the time I arrived at the station I was not only soaking wet but shaking as if with a fever. But I could not be ill. Jou-Jou would not allow it. I could not see my way clear—the thought of all that money had obviously affected me—but at least I was determined to do something. Another, and lesser man, might have hesitated. But not Hercule.

I went immediately to the Office of the Traffic Manager, and sat on Blanchard's desk. From my pocket I pulled out my watch.

"The time, M'sieu Blanchard," I declared portentuously, "is exactly three minutes past eight."

He did not seem particularly pleased to see me. He looked out of his window.

"That is what the station clock says," he replied.

"Yes—that clock is keeping quite good time. Listen, M'sieu Blanchard—I have a favour to request of you."

"What is it?"

"Would you be kind enough to put another driver on the fast goods today. Only for today."

"Why?"

Why—indeed. That was typical of Blanchard, to ask such a fatuous question. Of what concern was it of his? Surely my reasons were good and sufficient enough, or else I would never have asked such a thing. But all the time I was idly turning the watch over and over in my hands, and thinking furiously, and when at last I looked at him it was with a countenance bland and cherubic.

"It is my uncle's birthday," I told him, much in the same tone that one would inform a child of the existence of *le papa Dieu*.

"All right—all right. Here—take this note to the Line Superintendent. He will fix it."

"Thank you, M'sieu Blanchard. Thank you very much. You are very kind."

And I went out. I knew he was only waiting for an opportunity to get rid of me, but my thanks were none the less sincere. In my life I have had to suffer many fools gladly, but at least I have made my sufferings apparent.

Then I went to Armand, the Line Superintendent. Armand is a friend of mine, and I had no difficulty with him.

"Who are you going to put on?" I asked.

He ran his finger down the list.

"Leblanc—he is free. Yes—Leblanc."

"Where is he now?"

"In the sheds—why?"

"Give me your paper—I will take it to him."

Armand looked at me. I looked at Armand. I winked, and Armand grinned.

"And if there should be any questions," I told him, "you are trying out Leblanc to see if he is fit for the fast run."

"Right," said Armand.

And that was that. In dealing with a *crapule* such as Jou-Jou one cannot be too careful.

By now the beginnings of a scheme were taking shape in my mind. In the sheds I found Leblanc, a surly individual who was only too pleased at the prospect of earning one hundred francs.

I gave him his instructions and went to buy myself a drink, for it was thirsty work, all this planning and scheming, and now I had nothing to do until ten minutes to ten.

At exactly that time I lifted the receiver and spoke to Jou-Jou.

"Something terrible has happened," I told him. "That fool of a Line Superintendent has taken me off the run today—he is trying out a new man or something. It would happen just—"

"Shut up," said the voice of Jou-Jou. I trembled as I thought of the passion that had quivered in those two words. I shut up. I let him think. Who was I to argue with an *apache*?

"Can you make him put it off until tomorrow?"

"No—I tried that at once."

"Can you square this man—do you know him?"

"No—he is a stranger. It is too risky—he might open his mouth."

"Well—there is nothing to be done. I can't wait any

longer—everything is arranged. We shall have to stop him before he gets to Seychelles. I think you had better come with me, friend Hercule."

I smiled into the mirror, and the exultant face of Hercule smiled back at me. Ah—he was like clay in my potter's hands, that one. I had anticipated this. Had he not spoken thus I should have invited myself.

"What do you mean?" I asked indignantly.

"I mean that you know too much, friend Hercule—and you will be far safer with me. And I shall feel so much happier if I know where you are, friend Hercule."

"All right—all right. Where?"

He thought for a moment.

"Get into a taxi at once. There will be a blue Sizaire waiting in the Rue Marengo. Get inside and wait."

Jou-Jou hung up. I hung up.

I looked down and saw that someone had left an umbrella in the corner of the box. Gratefully I took it—not merely to save myself from getting wet, but rather as an acceptance of the sign that the gods had sent me. For I had never owned an umbrella in my life, although I was in the habit of borrowing one when it rained, and that this should happen to me, especially on such a morning, I took as a sign and a portent.

4

There is no need for me to go into details about that robbery—you probably read all about it in the newspapers. They made a great fuss about it, and naturally enough.

I was glad I had nothing to do with it. All I did was to sit inside a blue car, which I found without any difficulty, and wait until Jou-Jou joined me.

This was a Jou-Jou in a beautifully-fitting morning coat, striped trousers and a top-hat, with his blue jowl

immaculately shaved and powdered—but it was still the same Jou-Jou. The expletive he used as he fell over my umbrella confirmed that, without the shadow of a doubt.

I kept quiet and shrank into the corner as the car moved away. I did not venture to speak while Jou-Jou rapidly divested himself of his beautiful clothes, having first of all taken the precaution of lowering the blinds, and put on his working suit.

Then I spoke, with commiseration in my voice.

“ So it has failed then ? You have no pictures ? ”

He contemplated me, not wrathfully, but in sorrow.

“ Hercule,” he said, “ I wonder sometimes how you continue to live. Assuredly you must find it difficult.”

“ But— ”

“ I have no pictures. I never intended to have any pictures. Michel has the pictures. He is taking them to Seychelles to put them in the truck.”

“ Then, where are we going ? ”

“ We are going to Seychelles as well, or rather, to the first signal this side of Seychelles. I have got to stop that fast goods and then ride in the cab to Ste. Ursanne.”

Thereafter we spoke no more. Eventually we turned off the main road, and after a while the car stopped. We all got out, and I saw that we were quite close to the railwayline.

Jou-Jou and the driver, whom I recognised now as Gaston, one of his men, scrambled up towards the signal cabin, and I followed along behind, thankful that at least it had stopped raining. Gaston pulled a revolver out of his pocket, and together they entered the cabin.

I waited outside and watched the disc turn back to danger.

Then Jou-Jou came out and beckoned me.

“ Gaston will keep her quiet—it won’t be long now,” he said, and glanced at his watch.

“ How far is the truck ? ” I asked him.

"A few hundred metres up—we got it from the quarry."

We did not have long to wait. I caught sight of a plume of smoke from the engine, and soon the fast goods appeared rocking around the bend.

Jou-Jou waited confidently by the track. As the engine roared on and he did not hear the brakes he lost some of his confidence.

As Leblanc earned his hundred francs—for I had impressed on him that he must on no account stop or slow down, not even for the signal—and the engine thundered past us, Jou-Jou lost the remainder. His language, I regret to state, became appalling.

But I did not wait to listen. I had already started to run beside the swaying and jolting trucks.

I heard Jou-Jou bawl to the signal cabin, and turning round, saw that they were following me.

I ran on. Soon I was following them, for I was unaccustomed to such violent exercise, and had not had as much practise in running away from *gendarmes*. Still, I kept on doggedly, if slowly, and I was not very far behind when we came in sight of the points which led to the quarry.

The truck was not on the line. I had not expected it to be. One hundred francs is a considerable outlay to a poor man, but I will say that Leblanc, in spite of his surliness, gave me excellent value for my money.

The engine was heavy. It was of the compound articulated Mallet type, and it had been travelling fast. The truck was empty—I had reasoned that Jou-Jou's gang would pick an empty one as it would be easier to push—apart from the weight of Michel, Jou-Jou's lieutenant, and some pictures. The result was never in doubt.

The splintered wreckage of the truck had rolled down

the embankment into the field below. As we came up we saw Michel feverishly hunting about beside it. He must have jumped clear when he heard the train approaching—ah, he had nine lives, like a cat, that one. But this must have been the ninth he had saved, as I will tell you later on.

Jou-Jou and Gaston plunged straight down the slope. But I used my brains. The truck, from the look of it, had turned completely over before it rolled down, and so I stopped beside the line and looked—*'crenom de nom'*—how I looked, M'sieu. My eyes were those of a hawk, or of an eagle.

This was my chance. This was what I had been waiting for. For this I had expended one hundred francs, thus reducing myself to penury, for I knew that I would get nothing from Jou-Jou.

But I was after something more important than a miserable one hundred francs. I knew what I was after. And I got it.

Between the ends of two sleepers, half concealed in the weeds that grew high on the edge, I saw a roll of canvas.

In a flash I had picked it up and stuffed it into my umbrella. Then, with hardly a pause, I went on, scrambling down the embankment, and joined them in their search.

5

That is to say, I came near the truck and started to poke about helpfully until Jou-Jou suddenly looked up and saw me.

"*Fouts-moi la paix,*" he growled.

And so after that I just waited there and watched them, leaning on my umbrella and getting back my breath.

They were all very busy. Even Jou-Jou, who does not as a rule take kindly to work, had no time to swear. *Tonnerre*—how they worked. How they bent and groped

and tugged and pulled and pushed, getting dirtier and dirtier every moment—it did my heart good to watch them.

I contemplated their efforts with a benevolent and passionless calm. After all, I could understand their excitement—I agreed with their every emotion.

I felt for them. Indeed, I grew tense with a feverish dread myself, as the minutes dragged on and still it seemed as if they had sworn to pick up every piece of that wrecked truck and look underneath it, for with every moment I expected to hear the shouts and the whistles of the *gendarmes*. And not only the *gendarmes*—for at that moment I felt sure that every man in the *Quai d'Orsay* was running about the streets of Paris looking for us.

Then Jou-Jou raised his lean and wolfish countenance and blasphemed to the skies. *Mort de ma vie*—he used the most dreadful words with a fearful rapidity and a total lack of repetition.

I watched him. In a way my heart bled for him. I knew what he was suffering. To have taken all that trouble—to have gone to such an expense to steal those pictures, and then, through a mischance, to find one missing—to know that one was missing and to be unable to linger, knowing that every moment brought the chase nearer—ah, that was galling, to say the least of it.

"What is the matter, Jou-Jou?" I asked him, moulding my features into an expression of grave concern.

He stopped. He looked at me, and there was a cold and evil ferocity in his eyes which sent a shiver down my back.

"There is one missing, friend Hercule," he said softly.

"That is strange," I began, "if Michel——"

"If Michel what?" snarled that worthy, thrusting his bestial and sweat-streaked countenance two centimetres from mine.

"Nothing—nothing," I hastened to assure him. "I only meant that if Michel had them all in the truck and no one else was there and now that the truck overturned we are here——"

"Ba—ferme ta gueule," snapped Jou-Jou. "You talk like an old washerwoman."

And so I said nothing. Once or twice I caught Jou-Jou looking at me in a peculiarly intent manner, but I met his gaze boldly, and when they finally stopped casting about through sheer exhaustion I thought it best to speak.

"Look here, Jou-Jou," I told him. "It is no good looking at me like that. I haven't got your picture—how could I? I have only just come here, and you wouldn't even let me help you."

"I do not trust you very much," he answered. "Always, whenever you are about, friend Hercule—things begin to go wrong. You are a bird of ill-omen."

"Maybe—but that is not my fault," I told him. "Rather let us blame that malignant fate which, in spite of my ceaseless and relentless striving——"

But here I discovered that I was addressing the wreckage of the truck. They were already on their way back to the car.

Sighing at their lack of courtesy, I hastened to follow them, for I had no mind to remain in such a locality.

Jou-Jou dropped me at the nearest Metro station, and from there I went home.

But on my way I called in at the *café* and persuaded the *patron* to modify his somewhat rigid views on the subject of credit.

I put it to him reasonably, as one man to another, that

we progress along the highway of life not as if along a *Route Nationale*, but rather in the manner of a switchback, up and down and down and up and never the same. At one moment fortune would be smiling, and then it was downhill and easy, and the slope seemed very pleasant but much too short, and then, in a moment, it would be uphill again, and the road would seem stony and hard, and interminably long. But who would be rash enough to set himself up as a prophet, and say, that because the road went uphill at the moment that it would continue to do so, that the hill would last for ever, that fortune would never smile again once she had averted her face? And so on.

Before my eloquence he was powerless. I left the *café* holding my umbrella in one hand and two bottles of Pommard in the other. I do not know which hand ached the most by the time I reached home—I only know that I was very thankful to get there.

I sat down at the table, and it seemed that in a moment I was drawing the second cork. That is the trouble with the good things of this life, M'sieu—they are all far too short.

Having satisfied my thirst, I reached for the umbrella and drew the canvas out very carefully. Then I unrolled it and propped it up against the light from the window.

How long I gazed at it I do not know.

It seemed that I saw all the sorrow and all the pain in the world. It seemed to me that I saw the misery of children and the anguish of youth and the quiet hopeless grief of old people. I saw sorrow that was so great that it became beautiful and on all that beauty I gazed until I saw peace.

I saw the comfort of the last cart coming home at harvest time, and the peace of a child's head asleep on a pillow, and the tranquillity of the earth ripening under an autumn

sun. I saw the peace of low tide, and of the late birds homing to their nests when the day is done.

It seemed that in her eyes I caught glimpses of a beauty that tore my heart, it was so wonderful and so poignant and so real. And as I looked it seemed that I was staring at myself, at the child who used to be me and was dead.

I sat there for a long time, until the light faded, and it grew too dark to see. Then I rolled up the canvas and put it back inside the umbrella.

Then I went out again, back to the *café*.

This time I did not talk so much. I went up to the *patron*, as if I had just left him, and said :

“ Can I have two more, please ? ”

He looked at me, and started to speak. Then he turned round, muttering to himself, and banged the bottles on the counter.

I took them, and sat in a corner, and finished them in silence.

And when I had finished them I listened to that tiny voice which had begun to speak within me—that voice which had shouted so loudly and so gleefully all the morning, which had sung inside me all the way home—and whose noise had been stilled and crushed and obliterated by the beauty of that picture.

I could not look at it again. I did not dare. There are some things a wise man does not remember as he goes through life, M’sieu, and the memory of what he dreamed and the innocence of what he was are two of them.

And now that little voice was whispering again inside me. It came up from the bottom of those two bottles and out of their necks, and it danced into my brain, all dripping with good red Pommard, and it kept on speaking to me, again and again and again :

“ It is only a picture—only a famous picture. It may

mean something to some people, but to you it means money, thousands of thousands of francs. To you it means leisure and comfort and wealth—all that you have been striving for—all that you have worked and schemed for all your life."

Yes, M'sieu—I am ashamed as I tell you. Temptation spoke in that little voice. Temptation tore me with a strength that was like a giant—in spite of its tiny voice. Temptation gripped me as if in a vice. What could I do, as fate began to tighten the screw? Ah—for those who have never experienced temptation—it is easy to be virtuous, easy to condemn.

But of all the evil things I have done in my life, I have never condemned. I, Hercule, am tolerant. I myself have known what temptation can be.

Before an onslaught of such incredible ferocity I was powerless. I succumbed. Such is the weakness of human nature.

Even as I made up my mind, I pleaded with myself. The sight of that picture had unlocked my heart and released things which I thought time and the wickedness of this world had killed. But in spite of that I could do nothing against a temptation so ruthless and malignant.

I pleaded in vain. Even as I pleaded I knew that I was going to sell it.

Now I dare say that if I had thought calmly and reasonably about the whole thing I would never have acted as I did.

But that was just the point. I could not think calmly and reasonably about that picture. It was too disturbing. You, as a man of intelligence and understanding, will realise what I mean.

I was in a state of mental emotion pitiful to behold. I wished I had never looked at the picture—that was the artist in me. I wished I had never mixed myself up in the affair at all—that was the prudent side of me. But I had been mixed up in it and I had looked at the picture—that was the logical and practical part of me—the man of action.

Eh bien—now I had it, the thing to do was to get rid of it. And that was Hercule the philosopher, accepting the situation, and shouting louder than any of the other voices that tried to make themselves heard through the fumes of that most excellent Pommard.

But what with all these voices, M'sieu—all shouting and all making a noise together—I admit that I did not approach the problem in my usual competent manner. True, I had no previous experience to guide me. Never before had I attempted to turn an *objet d'art* or a *chef d'œuvre* into hard cash. But I am the first to admit I should have known better.

Behold me, then, in an omnibus on the way to Montmartre, with my mind a seething turmoil and my umbrella held reverently across my knees.

Behold me a little later, as I stood inside the premises of Steinemann the pawnbroker. Yes—I know it was foolish, and I can see from your face that you find it difficult to believe. But that is actually true. I went to a pawnbroker. The only thing I can plead in my defence is that I at least remembered to take the picture out of my umbrella and have it under my arm when I entered the shop.

Steinemann was old and dirty. In his eyes were the wisdom and the persecution of two thousand years.

"My late wife's mother has just died," I began. "This picture has been left to me. Alas—I am poor—I cannot afford to hang it up and contemplate its beauty."

My motherless children cry out for bread—how much will you give me for it?"

That was not bad, I told myself—not bad at all.

He looked at the picture, and he looked at me. He took a dirty glass from out of his pocket and examined it very carefully, holding it up to the light. He took the glass out of his eye, which was just as dirty, and looked at me again—a long intent look I did not like at all. His eyes just then looked like piercing needles.

"One hundred francs," he said.

"Ridiculous," I answered, and held out my hand, for the picture. But he made no move to give it to me.

"I said one hundred francs," he repeated softly. "And if I were you, M'sieu—I would take it."

"But you are mad," I spluttered. "That is a valuable picture—it is a thing of beauty——"

"Yes—I agree with you," he replied quietly. "And a lot of people think the same, M'sieu—far too many people for your peace of mind."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that next time you try to sell a stolen picture, M'sieu, the first thing to do is to put it in a frame. I am sure your mother-in-law did not leave you a rolled-up canvas. The second thing is to make sure that it is not a picture which everyone knows. The third thing is not to present yourself in my shop the same evening that the Louvre has been robbed. But we are talking far too much—I offer you one hundred francs—do you accept?"

What could I do, M'sieu? I am sure you appreciate the difficulty of the situation. He had a telephone in the back of his shop. And more important still, every word he said was true. And hearing the truth is seldom acceptable, especially when one has acted like an *imbécile*. For that was just what I had done. Ah—I make no excuses.

That is not the way of Hercule. I was wrong. Therefore I am the first to admit it.

But it is not a thing I like to think about. Indeed, the very memory of that man makes me feel ill.

"Thief," I said. "Scoundrel. Robber. Liar. Give me the hundred francs."

And I took the money and went out of his shop as fast as I could, with bitterness in my heart.

Yes, bitterness—but with the bitterness there was a calm and a resignation which other and lesser men would never have known.

I had bought my experience. I was not in exactly the same financial state as before I had disbursed one hundred francs to Leblanc. No—I was worse off, because I owed money for the Pommard. Moreover, I was without the picture, for which I had risked so much, for which I had worked and planned so hard. But I was not the loser. Ah no—that I would not admit.

I had been foolish—and the gods had punished me, severely and relentlessly, as is their custom. But I took their punishment, and accepted it. I bore them no grudge. I did not blame or censure them. They had their job to do—since when the world was young there must have been a Wisdom that created even the gods who sit in the high places—even as I had mine. And Hercule is a man who likes to see a job well done, whatever it may be.

They might have kicked me down. Indeed, the point is irrefutable. I was down. But I, Hercule, would get up. That is what I think important. I would get up again, and try once more. And that is something which no one—not even the gods themselves, not even the wealth and the wickedness and the injustice and the suffering of this world, not even *le bon Dieu* Himself—could prevent me from doing.

I would get up again, and try once more. And I like

to think that the number of times I have done that is noted down somewhere in the great book up above, where debit and credit are kept with a meticulous exactitude, and opportunities of cooking the accounts do not exist as they do down here. It is, at least, a comforting thought, and it does me good to entertain it.

Because every time I get up I feel I have learnt a little more.

CHAPTER THREE

I

Now the next morning a very strange thing happened.

I had passed the points by Billancourt, and giving the regulator a tug, I leaned out over the side. Then I swore to myself, because far ahead I could see something on the line.

I tugged at the regulator once more, whistled, and as the heavy train lurched on, gathering speed rapidly, I kept the whistle blowing. If there was something or someone on the line, it was clearly their duty to remove themselves. I, Hercule, had given notice and warning of my approach. I, Hercule, was not paid to remove things from the lines of *Madame La Compagnie*, but to drive her train to the coast.

Thinking thoughts such as these, I opened the regulator a little more, but I still kept my gaze on the line ahead.

Then suddenly—quicker than it takes to tell, I had shut off steam and jammed on the brakes. What I could see ahead, now dangerously near, was the body of a man. His neck was on one rail and his legs on the other. And he did not move.

I think I told you what type of engine I had on that train—it was just as well, for his sake. With those compound driving wheels one gets a greater braking surface—but even now I turn cold when I think of it.

The engine seemed to sit down on the track, and behind us there came a thunderous clattering as my sixty trucks rammed themselves together, buffer on buffer, until the tremendous strain began to push the engine on, its locked wheels sliding on the rails. In a second I freed them and braked again.

It was a near thing, but in the end I pulled up a few metres from the body. Then I got down. Then I walked to where he lay.

Ah—believe me, I was angry. I was frightened too—because when you have once seen a body after driving-wheels have passed over it, you do not wish to see it again. The whole thing had been too near for my liking. And so because I was frightened I became even more angry.

"M'sieu," I addressed him, "if it is not asking too much, may I be permitted to drive on? Were there a loop line, you can be sure I would not dream of disturbing you—I would ask the signal woman to switch the points and drive around you—are you sure——"

But here I realised that my sarcastic eloquence was being wasted. The man had fainted.

So I picked him up and put him in the cab, and we drove on.

I propped him up against the coal, and concentrated on my driving, because now we were late, and I had to make up time.

But after a short while I heard a voice behind me.

"What happened—where am I?"

And as he spoke he cowered back against the coal. I turned round. My fireman had the furnace door open and was shovelling like a maniac. The air was full of coal dust, and just then we roared over an iron bridge.

I laughed. I could not help it.

"Rest assured, M'sieu," I told him, "you are not dead. Neither are these the nether regions—although it might look like it to you. You are in the engine of the fast goods to the coast, and I am Hercule its driver who saved your life."

Now I was not boasting when I told him that. Nor did I expect to gain anything from imparting such information, for a would-be suicide would obviously not be well blessed with this world's goods.

But I am a logical man. I always believe in putting matters in their true perspective. The man's thoughts were obviously in a state of confusion. He had shut his eyes in the firm conviction that they had looked their last upon this world. He opened them in an infernal clatter and din, and beheld a giant and gaping furnace and a black-faced fireman shovelling coal like a man demented. It was bound to be a shock, even to a man less sensitive than myself. But it would do him no harm to hear the truth.

I looked at him. He was a gentle old fellow with grey hair and a mild expression. His clothes, as far as I could gather beneath the mud and slime from the sleepers and a coating of coal dust, were of good quality though somewhat old-fashioned.

"You should not have done that," he said peevishly.

"*Mort de ma vie*," I swore, "what you do with your own life is your concern. But I do not wish to spend my evenings filling in a mass of *paperasse* in triplicate and quadruplicate—nor do I relish having to clean your blood and entrails from my wheels."

I must have spoken sharply, for I was filled with righteous indignation. He shuddered and sighed dejectedly, and I saw that he was nothing but a poor old man.

"I am sorry, M'sieu," he said. "You are quite right—it was thoughtless and inconsiderate of me. But I wished to die—I have betrayed a trust."

"Whatever you have done," I said, "you should not wish to die. How will that help?"

"You do not understand."

"Maybe not. There are many things about this life I do not understand. I do not understand its cruelty and its injustice—still less do I understand its beauty and its goodness. I only know that they are all there—and I accept them. And I do know that it is wrong to leave them all—there is too much to learn—too much to do, and so little time for it all."

"The gods will tell you when they have decided that you have tried enough—who are you to argue with them? Whatever you have done—it is finished, because you have done it. The page has turned. Life does not stand still because one has made a mistake. It goes on—one must go on with it. Failure is but the opportunity to try again, a little more intelligently."

Thus I talked to him, and thus I reasoned with him, while I told my fireman to watch out for the signals, for by now my bad temper had evaporated, and I saw that he was only a poor old man, and dirty and frightened.

"That is all very well," he replied. "But you do not understand. I am Lucien Duplesne, the Curator of the Louvre."

I turned to study my pressure-gauge intently. When I looked at him my face was expressionless.

"Yes?"

"It is difficult for me to explain. You do not—I

suppose you have not time to study art—you will find it hard to believe but—M'sieu, yesterday some pictures were stolen from the Louvre."

"I know. I heard about it."

"It is not an ordinary theft. For me—it is something far more serious. Those pictures were in my care—I feel I am responsible. Some of those pictures have brought comfort and inspiration to thousands—people came from all over the world. There was one—the Mona Lisa——"

"I know. I have seen it."

"Ah—then you will understand. You will realise what I am trying to say. When I think of that wonderful picture—at which the whole world has marvelled—hidden away somewhere—buried from the light of day—secreted to avoid a police inquiry—I feel that mankind has suffered an irreparable loss. And I am to blame—I am responsible."

And he bowed his head in his hands.

My thoughts flew back to the previous afternoon. Had I not looked at that picture myself I should have felt that he was a silly old man.

But now I knew better. I, Hercule, understood what he was talking about, for I too, in my humble way, am an artist. My thoughts came in a surge to overwhelm me, until it was as if I did not dare to think any more and I had to say something.

"But was that the only picture stolen?"

"No. They took a dozen—but that one was the most beautiful and the most celebrated. That picture was something that comes but once to any civilisation. That picture was one of the wonders of the world."

"I know," I said again. "I have seen it."

And even as I spoke I knew what I had to do. I, Hercule, am not the man to hesitate once my mind is made up. I knew what I had to do. I had been weak. I

have given way to temptation. I had made a mistake—not the first in my life, and probably not the last.

But here the gods were offering me a chance to redeem myself, to undo the harm I had done. And that is a thing, M'sieu, as you know, that they very seldom do. The more reason then, for me to accept their offer.

"Listen, old one," I said gently. "Do not worry. I, Hercule, will get that picture back for you."

He stared at me as though I were mad.

"You? But how—"

"Do not worry. I have a shrewd idea where it has gone," I told him with perfect conviction, for was I not speaking the truth?

"But how—"

"That I cannot tell you. But I know many people—I know where to go. I will get your picture back. It must have been fate that put your head on the line. Fate has sent you to the right man—to the only man who can help you."

He looked at me eagerly. There was hope now in his eyes.

"Yes—yes—I believe you. It must have been fate. All night I did not sleep—and then I came out from my garden to the line—"

"And fate led you to Hercule," I finished for him, because I saw that he had begun to shiver again. "Which proves that obviously the gods are not ready to receive you yet. Do not worry—they will send for you soon enough when they want you."

And then I concentrated on my driving, for I, Hercule, am a man of action.

When we arrived at the coast he gave me his address and I put him in the train back to Paris.

I must confess that as I drove back myself on the afternoon run my heart was filled with a noble and self righteous joy. For was not I, Hercule, about to commit myself to a very hazardous enterprise, purely for the benefit of another?

Alas, my rejoicing was only tempered by the reflection that this emotion should occur so infrequently. But this twinge of regret served not to detract, but rather to add a savour to my happiness, somewhat in the manner of a piquant sauce.

Here was an old man, an idealist—one who loved his work so passionately that he took the blame for a theft which had nothing to do with him. Here was an old man who loved the pictures he cared for so devotedly that he was prepared to commit suicide at their loss. Here was an old man who had blundered into Hercule's life, and Hercule was going to help him. Ah, M'sieu—that was a beautiful thought.

I did not even know what salary they paid a Curator of the Louvre. No mention of any reward had been made. I did not even know whether he had a daughter. If she existed, she probably had lank hair and a bad complexion, and peered shortsightedly through spectacles at her father's masterpieces—indeed, the more I thought of my unselfish devotion the happier I became.

I did not pause to consider the incongruity of my action. It happens sometimes that one is conscious of the mind directing the body, ordering and controlling one's actions like the movements of a well-oiled machine, and again, there are occasions when the body takes control, and if the mind thinks at all, it is to invent and explain reasons for what it knows inevitably it must do. At the time I just accepted the fact that I was going to get that picture back ; I did not try to understand why or what was impelling me.

Now as I reflect I realise that if I had not looked at

the picture I would have acted otherwise. I would have thought of myself, as I have done, alas, for most of my life. But the previous afternoon I had caught a glimpse of the dreams one had when a boy, and believe me—they are vastly different.

But at the time I did not pause to think. I only know that I was happy, with the only kind of happiness that counts, because it comes so rarely.

I had no plan. The only thing I could do was to try to get that one picture back from Steinemann. What I would do about the others I had not the vaguest idea. But, I, Hercule, am not the man to anticipate difficulties. Rather have I always been inclined to permit the doubts and trials and troubles of life to approach me, singly or together, whichever they prefer, and then rely on my ability and intelligence to give a good account of themselves.

4

In the evening, as soon as I was free, I took my umbrella and went to the shop of Steinemann the pawn-broker.

The inside of the shop was dark and dirty, like its owner, and for a long time no one appeared. I was banging on the counter with my umbrella before the figure of Steinemann materialised out of the gloom.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Good evening, M'sieu," I said civilly. "Do you remember me?"

He peered at me from between his rheumy and sticky eyelids, and shook his head.

"No. I do not remember you."

"But I was here last night."

"I do not remember you."

"But I brought a picture—you gave me one hundred francs."

"I do a lot of business. But I find it better not to remember," he told me.

Now I am not normally an excitable man, but I admit that I began to feel a trifle disturbed. Supposing this old scoundrel refused to admit he had the picture?

"Listen," I began, "it will be better for you to remember me, as I am not the type of man who enjoys being forgotten, even by such as you. Last night, if you will make a special effort, you will recall that I brought you here, into this very shop a picture—a canvas which had been removed from its frame. I placed it on this very same counter, and you took it and paid me one hundred francs. Now do you remember?"

He peered at me for a very long time. Then he put up a long and dirty finger, and with his finger nail began to pick at a crust he had on his head.

"Yes," he agreed at length, "I do remember."

Ah—that gave me new confidence. Perhaps he saw in my eye that I was not an ordinary man. Perhaps he read in my expression that I was Hercule, a man engaged solely on a motive of the most altruistic kind.

"Good. That is why I am here again tonight. There has been a mistake. I should never have sold that picture. Here is one hundred and fifty francs—I would like to have that picture back, if you please."

He went on looking at me, and ceaselessly his long and dirty fingernail continued to pick at the crust in his head. I began to get annoyed.

"Well?"

He shook his head, but he did not stop his picking, so his whole arm and hand shook with it.

"No—I am sorry. It is not for sale."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it is not for sale."

"But—I must have it. I have given my word."

"That is your fault."

"*Ventre du Pape*," I swore, "what and who are you to say what I should do? I am offering you fifty per cent profit on a deal which you made twenty-four hours ago—surely that is reasonable?"

"About this affair," he said, "there is nothing at all that I can see which is reasonable."

I controlled myself with a great effort. After all, losing my temper would not help me to get the picture back.

"Now listen," I began, "I am asking you to do me a favour. I dare say you could make a greater profit if you kept it longer. But there has been serious trouble about this picture—"

"I know that," he interrupted, with a look I did not like at all. Indeed, the longer he looked at me the less I liked it. I remembered what he had said to me the night before, and suddenly I began to feel frightened.

"You do not understand," I said. "This is serious. There is a human life at stake—"

Again he interrupted me.

"You told me your mother-in-law was already dead."

I began to feel that I understood why there had been massacres and pogroms throughout the history of this civilised world. I began to feel like a child who has begun an argument with its teacher. I began to feel helpless—which is not a good feeling for a man such as Hercule.

I had been reasonable. I had asked him—I had pleaded—I had argued. Now I would threaten.

"Listen well," I said to him. "You are wasting my time. I admit I may have told you lies about that picture. You will also admit that you paid me one hundred francs for it knowing well that it is worth a thousand times more.

But none of that is important. The only thing that matters is that I mean to have that picture back."

He lowered his finger and contemplated his fingernail.

"There," he said, "now I have made it bleed."

In sheer disgust I spat upon the floor. Then I turned and walked towards the door.

"You have forgotten your umbrella," he said softly.

I slid the bolt and walked back quickly to the counter. He took a step backwards, but I had vaulted over in a second. I took him by the throat and scowled into his staring eyeballs.

"Give me that picture," I told him.

He gasped and gurgled, and then pointed towards the back of the shop. I relaxed my grip and pushed him forward. He pointed to an iron chest which stood in the corner against the wall, its lid open. I gave him a final squeeze and pushed him into a chair.

He made no attempt to interfere but shrank back in his seat and watched me take the canvas without moving.

"If you inform the police," I told him, "I will swear that you gave me one hundred francs for it, knowing that it was stolen, and if they put us in the same prison I will strangle you."

Then I went out, carrying my umbrella very carefully.

Now I am the first to admit that it was unjust, M'sieu—more, that it was a brutal and unjustifiable assault. I do not deny it.

But I know that I spoke to him in the only language he and his kind understand. Indeed, as I came out from the shop I reflected how pitiful it was that even in this world today, where arguments and persuasions fail, brute force

can still prevail. Was it for this that mankind has struggled and progressed so long?

I reflected thus with bitterness as I hastened to put a great distance between me and that shop, but on the other hand I had no regrets. I would have done it again, cheerfully. I was not doing it for myself, perhaps that was why I did not care.

Indeed, the fifty francs that I had offered him, and which I was prepared to pay, would have come out of my own pocket. I may have used one old man hardly, but in my mind I had the picture of another old man, a gentle old man, a man whose eyes were bewildered and frightened and unhappy—and with whose grief and sorrow I had had far too much to do. . . .

Ah no—most certainly I had no regrets. On the contrary, I was very pleased with myself, I was so pleased that I was tempted to reward myself in what I considered to be an eminently suitable way. I decided to take the picture home with me, so that I could have another look at it.

Duplesne had given me his address, but I was convinced that whatever confidence he may have had in my abilities, he did not expect me that night. I could go there in the morning before I began my work.

So after I had eaten something at the *café*, I bought a bottle of wine and went home. I unrolled the canvas and propped it up on the kitchen table where it caught the light. Then I uncorked the bottle and filled a glass.

Then I sat down and stared at the picture.

It seemed that I saw my mother's eyes as I had seen them when I was a child and woke up terrified from some nightmare, and went softly into her room because I was frightened. She used to wake, and make room for me beside her in the bed, and she did not reproach me, but just smiled at me, and in her eyes was comfort and peace,

and a great understanding. It seemed then as I sat and watched and drank that my mother's eyes still regarded me, and I knew somehow that she was still watching her child, and a great horror and sadness caught hold of me and I wanted to cry out aloud, because I knew that her child had grown into something she would not recognise, and it seemed to me an evil way to repay her love.

For a long time I sat there drinking and watching that picture, and the wonder of its beauty grew upon me until I became afraid, because I could not understand.

Then at last I rolled it up, placed it in my umbrella and went to bed.

6.

The result of all this was perhaps not surprising. I woke up with a headache. When I looked at my watch my headache grew worse. It was a quarter past ten.

But after the first initial shock, my nature quickly gained its philosophical equilibrium. It was an indisputable fact that the morning goods train had already left, with a different driver. It was also unarguable that, however much I hurried now, I could not hope to get there in time to drive it. Therefore why worry? I might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb—if I was going to be late, I might as well be properly late.

So I took my umbrella and caught an omnibus to the Louvre, and as I sat there I ceased to worry about such trivial matters as my work and punctuality, and surrendered myself wholly to that exquisite glow of righteous self-satisfaction which surged in my veins every time I pressed the handle of my umbrella.

He would be grateful, that old man. But I, Hercule, did not need his gratitude. It was not for that I had brought his picture back. I had brought it back because

—because someone who had once been Hercule had wanted to bring it back. That was enough. There was no need to argue and make a fuss as to what had happened. The picture was back. That was all that mattered.

And so, already deep in the conversation which would take place in a luxuriously furnished private office, accompanied maybe by a glass of wine and a biscuit, I came to the Louvre.

The fact that the porter was surly and kept me waiting hardly aroused any emotion.

"I wish to see M. Duplesne," I told him, my thoughts in another, and better world.

"You can't do that," he said.

"Oh yes I can."

"Oh no you can't."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

"What do you say?"

"I say you can't."

"Can't what?"

"What you said you could."

I decided that I must give my whole attention to this matter, if there were to be any progress made.

"Now look here," I began firmly, "son of a *mesalliance*—take me to M. Duplesne the Curator—or else your own sweetheart will have difficulty, because of your mutilations, in recognising you."

He knew when he had met his master, that one. Or perhaps he had a sweetheart, and they loved each other dearly.

"I am sorry," he stammered, "but that is impossible."

"Why?"

"Because there is no M. Duplesne here. Our Curator is M. Ronsard—has been for fifteen years—and he is with the police."

" Say that again."

He, obligingly, said it again.

I considered.

" What does your M. Ronsard look like ? Is he a gentle old man, with blue eyes—meek and subdued ? "

" Oh, no. M. Ronsard has brown eyes. He is like a great bull. He has a beard and shouts. He has shouted at us for fifteen years. He has shouted without stopping ever since the pictures were stolen."

Another, and lesser man, might have pondered over this surprising information for a long time. But not Hercule. Hardly were the words out of his mouth than I had turned and ran down the steps.

It seemed then to me that the Louvre was not the place for me to be in, still less for my umbrella.

7

Long before I came to the station I realised what had happened, and what a narrow escape I had had. It was obvious that Jou-Jou still suspected me and had chosen this method of finding out. Had I not decided to take the picture home—had I not overslept—I would have gone like a lamb to the address Duplessne had given me, and that would have been the end of Hercule.

I closed my eyes at the horror of the thought. I saw myself floating in the Seine with a knife-haft protruding from my belly, and it was not a pleasant sight, nor did the fact that the knife-haft was familiar detract from the melancholy of such a scene. For Jou-Jou, when he found out that I had deceived him, would have no mercy. He was not by nature a merciful man.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my belly.

Re-assured by the familiar sight, I beamed benevolently on all the other passengers on the omnibus, grateful

to the gods to find that I, Hercule, was still alive and not floating in the Seine. Most of them smiled back at me, because happiness is infectious—all except one attractive young girl, who must have had a rude mind, since she so obviously misunderstood me. . . .

But I had no time to consider her blushes. My mind was busily engaged in trying to remember what I had told that old scoundrel in the cab of my engine. What had I said? How far had I committed myself to Jou-Jou's vengeance?

And then as I remembered the fear left me and I felt curiously confident. I remembered that I had told him nothing, except promising to return his picture. Jou-Jou had no proof. When he saw me I would not have the picture. I would have failed in my mission. It would not be the first time that Hercule had failed : Jou-Jou would know that.

Still feeling thankful, I left the omnibus and made my way to the station.

In a very short time I had forgotten my thankfulness and was plunged once more into the depths of despair.

I will not dwell at length on my interview with that fat pig of a Blanchard—it was painful—to both of us. Indeed, it would serve no good purpose to record that conversation in detail—no good purpose at all.

He gave me to understand that he had found it difficult to keep even one of the trains waiting for me while I chose to lie in bed, and he made it clear that his duty, though painful, had been necessary, and he had been reluctantly compelled to find another driver.

In return I asked him the time, thinking to remind him of another occasion on which he had also been so sure, so smug, and so self-confident. I do not care to enlarge on what he told me to do with this valuable watch—indeed, M'sieu—not only was his suggestion a

physical impossibility, but it was one which, out of consideration for the excellent qualities of the watch, I would never for a moment entertain. . . .

Let it be enough to say that we parted in anger, and on my way down from his office I called in at the sheds for my hammer, and reflected soberly on the difference that would await me in my pay envelope at the end of the week.

That is to say, I remained plunged in gloom until a sudden shout startled me, and turning, I beheld Blanchard's office-boy carrying my umbrella. I had left it in his office, such had been my emotion at his remarks.

I took it eagerly, and felt a cold chill run down my spine as I thought of my carelessness. I gave the boy five francs, not because I could afford it, but because I knew he would tell Blanchard, and I felt it would make a good impression, to show him how little I, Hercule, thought of *Madame La Compagnie*.

And indeed, as I watched him go, and stuffed my umbrella securely into a corner of my locker, I realised that I really had no need to worry myself over-much with the affairs of *Madame La Compagnie*, for was not I, Hercule, in possession of a picture worth thousands of francs—hundreds of thousands of—well, anyway—I had a picture. No one could deny that.

But also I had a hammer in my hand. I was paid—inadequately it is true—to tap wheels. Therefore I, Hercule, would tap them to the best of my ability. That was something which not even the gods could deny. That was something which they were bound to enter in the great book above, and what is more, enter it on the right side.

CHAPTER IV

I

BEHOLD me then, M'sieu, once again tapping wheels, as I had done before and was to do again.

Early on the following morning, I was on the siding outside the station. As I worked I heard a whistle, and looking up, I saw the night express clattering in over the points on its run in from the coast.

I leaned on my hammer to watch, for to one of my nature, in such a sight there is a romance that familiarity can never destroy.

The great blackness of the engine, stark against the soft blue arch of the sky, the thrusting power of the driving-wheels, and the smooth gliding of the coaches—ah—in that I beheld the poetry of motion, and I was humble and thankful to be able to enjoy it.

But my artistic reflections were rudely disturbed. Suddenly an object hurtled past my head, nearly hitting me. It fell by chance on a patch of grass by the siding, and with an indignation in my heart that amounted to a not altogether unjustifiable anger, I went to investigate.

It was a small glass bottle, I found, unbroken by its fall, and half-full of some oily black liquid. In shape it was not unlike a medicine bottle—indeed, it bore the label of a chemist in Calais—but the neck was unusually wide.

I admit I was puzzled. I removed the cork and smelt it. I tasted a little, and promptly spat it out again. I was glad that it was not I who needed such medicine.

But it was not that which puzzled me. Why should anyone throw their medicine out of a window, in defiance

of the regulations clearly printed in each compartment—and risk injuring a valuable employee of *Madame La Compagnie*?

But I have lived long enough in an unjust world to know that it does not do to betray ignorance. The world has a habit of taking one at one's own valuation. Therefore I assumed an expression of profound intelligence, shouldered my hammer, and set out for the station to investigate.

On the platform I found a scene of great commotion.

The *rapide* had stopped, and around one of the sleeping coaches there was drawn a cordon of police. Fat Blanchard was there, and my friend Armand the Line Superintendent; they were both having an agitated conference with the guard and the sleeping-car attendant.

I drew nearer to the crowd which the *gendarmes* were holding at bay, and plucked one Simon, a porter whom I knew well, by the sleeve.

"What is it, then, that has happened?" I asked him.

Now Simon was a man who loved the sound of his own voice.

"*Tonnerre, Hercule,*" he replied, "here is an affair of the greatest importance. The guard dropped a message as the train passed through Amiens, telling them to telegraph to the station here for the police."

"But why?"

"Ah—you wish me then to give you a picture of what has happened—a *résumé* of the events?"

"That," I said patiently, for I knew my Simon, "was my intention."

"Very well. Now listen carefully. I have spoken to Henri in the telegraph office, but his account of it all was very confused and disjointed, but to you I will make it clear. *Madame La Baronne de Noyaule* is in that first-class sleeper, and *Madame La Baronne* has had her pearl

necklace stolen during the night, and to say that *Madame La Baronne* is upset is putting it altogether too mildly. But she is not the only one who is upset—and with good reason.

"The thief must have had a master-key, since each compartment can be locked from the inside. But it is certain that he did not use it on the communicating doors at each end of the sleeping-car, which are always locked by the attendant after the tickets have been examined, for there are two third-class sleepers at either end of that coach, and the attendants of each swore to the guard that no one had left the first-class coach or entered their own.

"They were awake and on duty from the time the boat came in, and they are men who can be trusted.

"One concludes, therefore, that the pearls must still be on that coach. It is extremely unlikely that the thief threw them out of the window to an accomplice, because first, *Madame La Baronne* gave the alarm in the heart of the country, secondly, the *rapide* was late and making up speed, and thirdly, in the darkness it would be madness to try to throw an object so small to land at a pre-arranged place.

"When the alarm was given, the attendant immediately called the guard, and everyone in the coach was aroused and searched. The whole carriage was searched, but without success.

"The guard, being a man of resource, ordered all the first-class passengers—there are only a dozen or so—into two compartments at the end of the coach, fastened up the windows, locked the doors, put the attendant on guard in the corridor, and dropped a message at Amiens. There," concluded Simon, "now you know as much about the whole affair as I do."

"Thank you, Simon," I replied meekly. "That was a

masterly exposition. Now, as you say, I know as much as you do."

Ah, but M'sieu—I knew a good deal more. And if my voice was meek and humble, my heart was beating fast.

Furtively, while pretending to watch the passengers whom the *gendarmes* were escorting from the sleeper, I took the bottle from my pocket and shook it. But only the liquid gurgled. There were no pearls inside. And therefore there was no need to be furtive about it any longer.

My heart resumed its normal beating. I remained a very puzzled man. But my features showed only an intelligent anticipation. I know they did, because I could see them reflected in the brightly-polished number plate on Simon's breast.

I continued to watch. And then I gasped in astonishment. Amongst the passengers was a monk. An unprepossessing monk, it is true, but a monk none the less. I had never seen that shaven head before, but there was no mistaking that blue jowl.

It was Jou-Jou the Rat.

2

My heart began to beat again, faster than ever. Wherever that evil *apache* happens to be, there is sure to be some villainy afoot.

I had no doubt but that he was the thief they were looking for. But how had he done it? And where were the pearls? I watched him closely, but he seemed unperturbed, calmly waiting, in company with the vociferous *Madame La Baronne* and the other indignant passengers, for the orders of the police.

I put my arm around Simon's neck and leaned forward to watch him better. Unthinkingly, I still held the bottle in my hand.

Suddenly Jou-Jou looked up and caught my eye. He frowned. Then he saw the bottle, and momentarily he went a delicate shade of green, just like an over-ripe Camembert.

Now this was more puzzling than ever. But I was not going to let him know that—not me. I continued to look intelligent. Yes, M'sieu—I looked at that wicked *apache* straight and fearlessly in the eye, as if I knew all about everything.

But at the same time I wondered what it could all mean. Mind you, I was not unduly worried, even by the sight of Jou-Jou and the thought of the interview I would have to have with him about the picture. No—this time it was Jou-Jou who was in trouble, and if Jou-Jou was in trouble that was emphatically Jou-Jou's affair.

So often in my life has Jou-Jou's trouble meant my misfortune that this time just to contemplate him was like sipping nectar. I was innocent. No—perhaps that is a too sweeping statement. What I mean to say is that whatever Jou-Jou had been up to this time, I would not be involved.

Comforted and heartened by this thought, with the bottle still in one hand, I began to play idly with Simon's number plate with the other, watching with an indifferent curiosity the police herding the passengers off to a waiting-room to be questioned and searched again.

Jou-Jou the monk followed obediently at the end of the line, enwrapped in absorbed contemplation, as though such worldly matters were of little importance.

But as he passed me, his eyes met mine, and he nodded, almost imperceptibly.

3

And for the moment, that was the end of the whole affair, much to Simon's disappointment. They searched all the carriage—they nearly tore it to pieces. They searched every passenger, but without success. In the end they had to let them all go. The pearls were never found.

That was the end of it all, as far as Simon was concerned. But for me it went on in the station *café* that night—once my umbrella had been taken safely home—after I had sat down at a corner table and ordered a very modest and inexpensive drink, as befitted a man who was existing on a pittance.

To me came Jou-Jou, in an ordinary suit and with a beautiful wig on his head. He sat down heavily and ordered a bottle of wine. I was pleased at this, because I knew it was going to be difficult, and I felt that half a bottle of wine—even of the vintage that Jou-Jou paid for—would enable me to view the situation with a little more confidence.

When the wine came Jou-Jou looked at me.

"*'Soir, Hercule,*" he grunted.

I returned his greeting civilly. Jou-Jou filled two glasses. We drank. Jou-Jou continued to look at me. I did not like that look very much, but I drank my wine as though I enjoyed it, and returned his look with my usual one of confident calm. After all, who was I to be browbeaten by a mere *apache*?

Then he fumbled in his pocket and suddenly laid a thick wad of notes on the table.

"There you are, Hercule," he said. "Five hundred francs. Count it."

Obediently I counted it. I was too astonished to do anything else.

"Quite correct," I told him, wondering what it all meant. Actually, I made it four hundred and ninety-seven—but I am not the type of man to split hairs. And in spite of what other, and lesser men may believe, when an *apache* tells you that a wad of notes totals five hundred francs, it is wise to agree with him.

He refilled our glasses. We drank again.

"I wish to settle this business first," he continued. "Afterwards there is another matter which must be cleared up."

My head was beginning to turn. I did not know what was going on. But five hundred francs is five hundred francs. I looked at the wad of notes. He had pushed it over towards me. In the midst of my bewilderment it dawned on me that the five hundred francs—or rather the four hundred and ninety-seven francs—were mine.

I decided to put a bold face on it. I took the topmost notes.

"Thank you very much," I said politely. "In that case we had better have another bottle."

He looked quite pleased at that, as pleased as a man with his scowling visage could ever look.

"I have often thought, Hercule," he said thoughtfully, "that there must be some special providence which watches over you. Assuredly you tread in good fortune with both feet——"

"On the contrary," I hastened to assure him, "the gods have knocked me down more times than I care to remember—but I get up again. Maybe sometimes they get tired——"

"You talk like an old washerwoman," he interrupted rudely. "You would have to be there on that siding just as I got rid of the bottle. All the way from Amiens they were watching me. It was only as we assembled together in the corridor ready to leave, that I had a chance. That

guard—he will go far. But a bargain is a bargain. But for your silence it would all have been over. I could see that you understood. You did your part. Now I have done mine."

I looked suitably impressed. I also continued to look intelligent—far more intelligent than I felt. We drank again, and finished the first bottle. We opened the second, and drank once more. This time it tasted more like wine, because I know what I am ordering.

All the time we were drinking I was trying desperately to see how he had done it, and what he meant. I cast my mind back to that scene in the morning, and went over every detail I had observed.

As Jou-Jou drank, so his scowl grew blacker. It is said that in wine a man's true nature becomes apparent—Jou-Jou was no exception.

"That is settled, then," he said. "Now we come to another matter, friend Hercule—a matter that has also to do with paint—but of a different kind," and he smiled at me evilly.

My heart began to beat faster at what he said, and then suddenly twice as fast as that. In a flash I realised what had happened.

In Jou-Jou's medicine bottle was no medicine—but a quick-drying paint, into which he had dipped the pearl necklace. Who would notice, while a monk was telling his beads, that the triple row of his rosary was a little longer than usual?

He saw me with the bottle and thought that I was going to give the alarm. But my intelligent expression, and the number five hundred on Simon's badge which I was twisting about—that was a language which Jou-Jou understood.

In my eyes there crept the innocence of a new-born babe.

"And what is that?" I asked him, with just the right amount of interest in my voice.

"You know very well," snarled Jou-Jou. He turned round and bawled for another bottle. Then he twisted in his chair again and thrust his blue jowl unpleasantly close to mine.

"Where is that picture?" he rasped malevolently.

"Which picture?"

"The one you filched from under my eyes."

"I don't know what you are talking about," I told him coolly.

"Liar."

I finished my glass with dignity.

"Jou-Jou," I said calmly, "either you are mad or drunk. You come here—you give me five hundred francs—you buy me a drink—and then tell me I have stolen a picture. And then you call me a liar. I know you do not mean the harshness of your words—"

"Bah—*ta gueule*—your tongue will not save you now. Where is that picture?"

"May I point out," I told him, "that it was you who robbed the Louvre—and not I."

He continued to scowl at me, but I breathed a little more easily. I could see the shadow of doubt in his eyes—and I knew that he had no proof, only suspicion. My unshakable confidence, I could see, had impressed him. All the same, I was glad when he uncorked that bottle and I could have a drink. The suspicion of such a one as Jou-Jou is not a good thing to experience.

"I know you are a liar," he reiterated doggedly. "You filched that picture when we were searching in the wreckage of the truck."

"You are talking nonsense," I told him. "How could I? You were watching me all the time. You came back with me. Be reasonable."

He swallowed the wine in his glass and glared at me. I could see he was working himself up into a rage, and in spite of the warm glow of the wine in my belly, a cold shiver ran down my back.

"You know I sent one of my men to lie on the line. You know what you told him——"

"What would you have told him?" I interrupted swiftly. "I believed him—I thought he was a poor old man who wanted to commit suicide. Of course I told him I would get it back—what else could I say?"

"How could you tell him you would get it back—unless you had it?"

"That is just the whole point. That was why I could make such a promise—because I did not have it. If I had it—do you think I would have given it back to an old man who lay down in front of my engine? Why—he nearly had that train off the line—and I should have been responsible."

Jou-Jou looked at me. His eyes had become red-rimmed and evil like those of a weasel. I knew he meant mischief. But I also knew that mentally he was no match for Hercule. The brilliance of my argument—the way I had neatly turned his own point against him, had left him dumbfounded. I knew that I was safe. I was safe merely because I had not acted logically. I was safe because I had looked at that picture and believed an old man's story.

"Why did you tell him you could get that picture back—what was your idea?"

I sighed and helped myself to another drink.

"Really, Jou-Jou," I told him, "you try my patience. You are in the cab of my engine. You see a man trying to commit suicide—in a particularly nasty manner. You save his life. He tells you he is the Curator of the Louvre and that he is heartbroken because someone has stolen

his pictures. He weeps. He appeals to you. What would you have done?"

I did not wait for an answer. I poured myself, unasked another drink.

"I did what any other man would have done. I promised to help him. If the Pope himself had come into my cab under such circumstances I would have promised to help him—why not? It took his mind off such a dreadful thought as suicide. It did not cost me anything. He might have been grateful. He might have had a beautiful daughter—the Curator, I mean, not the Pope—in short, anything was better than allowing him to despair."

Each time I had taken a drink, Jou-Jou had quickly done the same, lest he lose his fair share of the bottle. Now he tilted the empty bottle meaningly. I sighed, and called for another one. When he had filled his glass, he looked at me again.

"But it was a good idea—was it not?" he said suddenly, almost pathetically. "To lie on the line—it took you in, did it not?"

"Emphatically," I told him. "It was an excellent idea—I was completely deceived. But all that brilliant effort was wasted. I, Hercule, have nothing to hide. And if I had, I would never hide it from you."

"Why not?"

"Because it would be a waste of time. You would be sure to find out."

"Ah—you are right there."

"Yes," I agreed modestly, "I, Hercule, am often right. The trouble is, few people except me seem to realise it. And now I must ask you to excuse me. I have to get up early in the morning."

He began to laugh like a hyena.

"Yes—I had heard of that. You have been demoted, then?"

"I have had a temporary setback," I told him with dignity, "but a most entertaining and lucrative evening."

And I gathered up the notes and put them carefully in my pocket. All the time I did this I was conscious of Jou-Jou's beady eye upon me. He was not watching the money. But he had stopped laughing. And in his gaze there was that same cold and ferocious suspicion he had had before. I could see that he had forgotten everything I had told him, and that all my eloquence had been wasted.

It was not a pleasant thought. I said good-night civilly and left the *café*.

4

The night air was very cold. As it blew about my head, bringing with it a fine drizzle of rain, I realised that the *café* must have been very hot.

The air was cold on me who had been hot. I found myself laughing at this as I stepped across the road. If only I had had my umbrella with me, I could have opened it, and not only would the rain have been kept off, but hundreds of francs—no, thousands of—more, hundreds of thousands of francs would have fallen down upon my head. It was an amusing thought. It amused me.

Then, suddenly, many things seemed to happen all at once. I was conscious of a blinding glare of light—tyres skidded and screamed on the wet greasy road—I heard a shout and sprang to one side. Then something hit me. There was a great flash, and a roaring in my ears, as though I had sunk into very deep water, and I knew no more.

Then I heard a voice speaking. It spoke loudly and softly. It spoke deafeningly in my ear and then it went to the other end of a long tunnel, and whispered and boomed. It spoke in different tones, but to me it seemed all one voice.

"I tell you he is all right. *Espèce d'abrut*—you heard what I said. A man must be mad or drunk to step out in the road on a night like this. Of course I saw him, I tell you. Stand back and give him air. The fool jumped right on to me."

I opened my eyes and realised that I was lying on the pavement, surrounded by a group of people, most of whom were talking at the same time. Someone was supporting my head. A stout man was standing in front of me. His voice boomed above the others.

"Had I not been driving he would have been killed. Few men would have had the presence of mind—"

I interrupted him. I had been looking at him, and I came to the conclusion that not only had his automobile knocked me down, but that I did not like him.

"Few men would have been driving at such a dangerous speed on a night like this. Few men consider because they have bought an automobile, that the roads belong to them as well. Few men of such myopic vision that a pedestrian is invisible—"

"Are you talking to me, M'sieu?" he asked.

"I was. But now I have done. My solicitors will communicate with you in the morning. I am going to sue you for a very large sum—I am going to claim hundreds of francs—thousands—no hundreds of thousands—"

I stopped. I knew that there was agony in my knee. I could see that my trousers were torn and beneath I saw blood.

"I am hurt," I announced. "Take me to a doctor."

Everybody looked at the stout man. He bore it for a long time, but eventually he gave in.

"All right. Put him in the back. I will take him to the hospital."

I sat in the back of a large and luxurious limousine and felt very bad. I felt so bad that I addressed the back of the stout man's head.

"I am very grateful to you, M'sieu. Please forgive my words—I realise it was my fault. I was too hasty. I feel very bad."

"That is quite all right, M'sieu," he answered. "When one has had a severe shock—quite understandable. Try to bear it for another five minutes—you will be in the hospital then."

I closed my eyes. I thought he was very kind. I felt that everyone had been very kind, for after all, had I not been a fool, stepping off into the road without looking?

I opened my eyes. The pain in my knee was getting worse. I took the edges of the torn trouser-leg and parted them, and looked at the wound.

Then I fainted.

5

The next thing I saw was a rubber nozzle which a hand was bringing near my face.

"Breathe in," said a voice, and the thing was clamped on my nose and mouth.

I breathed in. Who was I to argue? The white coats and masks began to scintillate before my eyes and I seemed to be sliding downwards, very fast, and yet easily.

When I got to the bottom I opened my eyes.

My knee and most of my leg was swathed in an enormous bandage, which a beautiful nurse was just tying

up. One man in a white coat was coiling up a lot of rubber tubing. Another was wiping his hands. His coat looked like a butcher's apron, but he smiled cheerfully at me.

"Feeling all right?"

"Yes, thank you," I told him politely. "What has happened?"

"Oh—nothing much. You had quite a lot of the road in your knee—we have just cleaned it out. You will be all right soon."

He was ever so cheerful about it all. I could not say the same for myself. My whole leg was throbbing, and the throbbing came right up to my heart. I closed my eyes and I must have fallen asleep.

When I awoke it was morning, and I saw that I was in a ward. At the far end a nurse was going round the beds, taking the patients' temperatures. I hoped that it would be the beautiful one who had taken out the instruments the night before, but in that I was disappointed.

When she came to the next bed I saw that she was grim and impersonal. She looked like a hard and sour green apple.

But I did not look at her for long. A most attractive figure, whom I ascertained afterwards was the staff nurse, came in just then and sat down at her table which was almost opposite my bed. I looked at her.

Even when a thermometer was thrust into my mouth I still looked at her. She crossed her legs and continued to write busily. I went on looking at her. She was exciting.

The grim eyebrows almost disappeared into her starched cap as the nurse looked at the thermometer. I laughed. I could not help it.

"H'm—you have not got over that operation, then?" I shook my head.

"No. My knee—it is very painful."

After breakfast the staff nurse herself changed the dressings on my knee. By the time she had finished I no longer thought her attractive or beautiful. I leant back on the pillows with the perspiration running down my face and wished she had never been born.

Mind you—I was grateful. I knew she was helping me. I knew she was cruel to be kind. But it could never be the same again. In my estimation she could never be the same person again. She was just something that came round with the sterilising trolley. When she sat at her desk I closed my eyes.

No sooner had she gone than the grim-visaged tartar appeared again, and made my bed, quickly and efficiently.

Then she brought a tray with various bottles to the bedside and intimated that I should turn on my side, away from her. I did as she wished. I was in no condition to argue with anyone.

Then to my intense astonishment and embarrassment she pulled up the nightshirt with which they had clothed me and proceeded to anoint my posterior with oil. To a man of my sensitive nature it was a trying experience, I can assure you.

Mind you—I admit I was weak, and suffering from shock. In time I got used to it. I, Hercule, am not a man who is unable to adapt himself.

Indeed, as the weeks went by and a different and more attractive nurse charged herself with this perhaps exacting task, I even went so far as to treat the matter as a joke, and thinking to enliven the monotony of her existence, even found myself one day offering to turn around. Needless to say, she assured me that it was not necessary—nor for a moment could I truthfully say that I thought it was—but I am just telling you this in order

to emphasise the strangeness of all these proceedings to me, who never before had set foot in a hospital.

She went, taking with her all the bottles. Then the door opened and a most efficient young person appeared and sat on the end of the bed. In her hand she held a large printed form.

" Name please ? "

I told her.

" Address ? "

That, too, I gave.

" Age ? "

This went on for a long time. Gradually the form was completed.

" Next-of-kin ? "

I shook my head.

" None."

" None ? "

She looked up at me.

" That is most unusual."

" Yes."

" You are quite sure——"

I smiled at her. She was so young, so neat, and so efficient. I smiled at her, although I did not in the least feel like smiling.

" None," I assured her.

When she had gone I was sad. Perhaps I had not realised before how lonely I was in this world. Suddenly I wished that once again I could look at that picture. The desire grew until, because of the very fact that it was unattainable, it became almost unbearable. Then I turned my face to the pillow and wept.

Altogether it was a busy morning.

In the afternoon I was acutely conscious of my complete inability to move from the bed.

I called for the grim-faced nurse and signified what was for me an intensely embarrassing problem, for you must realise, M'sieu, that this was my first experience of a hospital, and also, as you will doubtless have gathered by listening to me, that I am a man of extremely fine susceptibilities, and of a sensitive nature.

But she just nodded in a very impersonal way and went off immediately to fetch what was necessary. As she arranged the screens around my bed I felt grateful to her for this impersonal manner. It was strange and new to me, who am and always have been an individualist, but at least it comforted me, and assuaged my mortification, for it made me understand that I was not Hercule—and moreover not a Hercule who was weak and embarrassed and *bas de moral*—but only a patient who needed attention. And the whole ward was filled with other patients, and the nurses were there because they needed looking after.

Well, although it was an entirely new experience for me, I, Hercule, am not the man to be daunted by any difficulty, however strange, however exacting. . . .

After some experiment, the greater part of which was unfortunately curtailed by the limited amount of time at my disposal—for in my embarrassment I had delayed until the last possible moment—I eventually succeeded in placing myself in the correct position.

Then I looked up—in my absorption I had not lifted up my eyes—and encountered the malevolent beady eyes of Jou-Jou the Rat peering at me over the top of the screen.

Such was my emotion that I nearly lost my balance. Indeed, it was only by a supreme effort of self-control that I prevented this disaster from happening, and greeted him with an *aplomb* that cost me dear.

"*Salut, Jou-Jou.*"

"*Salut, Hercule.* What in the name of a little blue dog are you doing?"

Ah—he was tactless, that one.

"I should have thought it was obvious to the meanest intelligence," I replied with all the dignity I could muster—which to be perfectly candid, was not a great deal. It was not, to say the least, a dignified posture.

But I, Hercule, have never let circumstances daunt me.

"How you got in here," I continued, "I do not know. But if you will wait until these screens are removed—since they are put here to indicate that what I am engaged in is of a private nature—I will be pleased to receive you."

The beady black eyes withdrew. I finished the most complicated part of the whole affair without any major catastrophe, and waited while the screens were wheeled away.

The relief which I should have felt at such a time was sadly mitigated by the presence of that evil *apache*. I wondered why he had come to bother me in the hospital. I was soon to find out.

The nurse brought him a chair, and he sat down beside the bed.

"How did you know I was here?" I asked him.

"Well, friend Hercule," he replied, "it was like this. You told me a lot of things last night—and we drank a good deal of wine together. At the time you sounded plausible—you have a tongue like a parson. But in the

morning your story did not sound so good to me—oh no, it felt about as good as my head, which was not very good. So I thought I would like a little chat with you, friend Hercule. With that in mind I called at the station. To my consternation you were not there——”

“ How could I be there—since I was here ? ” I interrupted him rudely. All this time he had been talking in a very soft voice, and I do not like it when an *apache* as evil as that one speaks to me in a soft voice. Besides, my knee was hurting me, and I was irritable.

The beady black eyes continued to watch me like those of a snake. He took absolutely no notice of my rudeness, which was a far worse thing than if he had flown into a vile passion.

“ As you say, friend Hercule—how could you be there ? You were in hospital, so they informed me. The hospital authorities had sent word to *Madame La Compagnie* that Hercule, their faithful and diligent employee, would not be able to work for them for quite a long time, since he had been knocked over by an automobile and was at present in Ward Number thirteen with a severely lacerated knee.”

I did not like Jou-Jou in this mood. I did not like him at all. Have you ever watched a cat as it moves and pats a badly wounded mouse, first with one paw and then with another ? I, Hercule, was the mouse, or at least, what with my throbbing knee and one thing and another, that is how I felt at that moment.

“ And so you came here ? ”

“ And so I came here.”

“ That was very thoughtful of you, Jou-Jou,” I told him. “ You are my first visitor. Have you brought me some little gift—flowers or something ? It is customary, you know.”

He spat upon the floor. It was a beautifully polished

floor of wooden boards. I propped myself up on the pillows and looked at it. Then I looked at Jou-Jou. Then I shook my head sorrowfully.

" You must wipe that up, Jou-Jou."

" Not I."

" You must," I insisted. " Such things are not done here."

" They are now."

" No. The Matron will forbid you to come. You must wipe it up."

" *Merde alors,*" said Jou-Jou, but he got off his chair nevertheless and wiped it up with his own handkerchief.

I felt relieved. I, Hercule, may have spent the greater part of my life in rough places, but at least I was well brought up as a child. I know what is done and what is not done.

But at the same time I felt more like a mouse than ever. What was he after, that evil Rat, that the threat of not seeing me could make him clean his own spit from the floor ?

I was soon to know.

" That would be a dreadful thing, friend Hercule," he continued, as he sat down again, " if I were not to see you any more. You see—I know you are the biggest and most unscrupulous liar in the world. And I think you have my picture."

" You are quite mistaken," I assured him. " And if you are going to have such hallucinations—I can give you a word of friendly advice. Give it all up—while there is time. The strain of the life you lead is obviously telling on your nerves. You are imagining things. You have illusions. Give it up. Invest your savings and become a *rentier*. The red light is showing, Jou-Jou. In every man's career, however distinguished, there comes a time——"

He spat again.

I looked at him.

Again he got up from the chair and cleaned it from the floor. Then he sat down again, heavily. There were beads of perspiration on his brow. I could see that he was feeling the strain. But I had no pity for him.

I was thinking desperately as to how I could provoke him again, when to my disappointment he suddenly got up.

"We can talk about this later, friend Hercule," he said. "I shall come to see you again—I am very interested in your recovery. And when you are better we can go to some quiet place and talk about that picture again. We shall not drink while we are talking—but once we have got this matter straightened out, why then I will gladly buy you a drink."

"That is very kind of you," I assured him, "and I appreciate your visit very much indeed."

He scowled at me and went out.

8

I will not weary you with a description of the weeks that followed while my knee healed. One day was very much like another.

The only other person who came to see me, apart from Jou-Jou, was my friend Robert. I was more pleased to see him than he realised.

"*Salut, Hercule,*" he grinned at me cheerfully. "How are you getting on?"

"Very well now," I told him. "I hope to be out soon."

"Good. How are they treating you? Have you a beautiful nurse?"

Robert's mind is apt to run along a certain groove, but he has been a good friend. I pointed out my grim-visaged nurse to him and laughed at his disappointment. Then I grew serious.

"Robert—I need your help. Have you any friends or relations in the country?"

"Yes—why?"

"There is a certain dark cloud looming up on my horizon. On the day I come out it will burst. It has to do with that evil man Jou-Jou."

"Ah—I am sorry."

Robert was sympathetic. He too, has been embroiled in the machinations of that wicked *apache*. He looked at me thoughtfully.

"There is my father-in-law—no. There is my aunt at Surennnes—but no. There is my young sister—certainly not. I have it."

"What?"

"My cousin Jules. He has a garage at Avenches. But what do you want to do?"

"I am going to disappear into the country for a while—I think it is better. I shall have peace there, and I need peace to settle a certain problem."

"But what about your job?"

"This problem is more important than my job. If I can settle it in a satisfactory manner, I shall not need a job. Will you be kind enough to write to your cousin—would he mind if I stayed with him?"

"Of course not. I will write and tell him you will be coming at the end of the month."

"Thank you very much. But say the 28th, not the end of the month."

"But the nurse told me——"

"I know. And that is what the doctor is saying too—to everyone. Do not worry—it is all arranged. Jou-Jou is in the habit of asking too many questions, so I have had to resort to a little subterfuge."

Robert leered at me knowingly.

"I can see the knock was on the knee—and not on the head," he said.

He gave me the name and address before he left and promised to write.

10

You will gather, M'sieu, that Jou-Jou was worrying me.

I had no wish to have that little chat for which he was so eager—at least, not while I had that picture in my possession. I could do nothing in the hospital ; for one thing I could not go out, and for another the picture was in my house. And besides, I never knew when Jou-Jou would be coming. I felt somehow that if I could get right away somewhere, I would arrive at a solution, both of getting rid of the picture and of avoiding his persecution.

The doctor had been quite amenable to my suggestion. I told him it was to have a few days at home before resuming my work, and being a sensible man he understood.

Everything went as I had planned.

The only slight *contrtemps* was that the storekeeper, like everyone else, had been informed that my discharge would take place at the end of the month. To him had been given my badly-torn trousers. On him rested the responsibility of issuing me with a new pair. This he was quite prepared to do—at the end of the month. His was one of those natures which are tied and sealed with red tape.

In my shirt I went down to his store, to beg and plead and threaten—but in vain. He was adamant.

For a moment I admit I hesitated. But the thought of Jou-Jou was like a cold draught—colder even than the one blowing about my legs.

I marched out of the front door with as much dignity as I could assume, contriving to impart to my progress a sense of urgency which was in no need of simulation.

In the end I found a taxi to take me to a store where

I could buy a new pair, but by that time my progress had become something of a triumphal procession. Mercifully I avoided a *gendarme*, and even if an account of the affair did appear in the evening newspapers, at least no photograph was taken.

For that I was grateful.

CHAPTER V

I

BEHOLD me then—outside the garage of Robert's cousin Jules at Avenches.

It was an ordinary village garage—a huge rectangular shed with an iron roof, and an outbuilding stuck on the back, the front opening on a cement forecourt on which the petrol-pumps were installed.

Avenches itself appeared to be a row of houses each side of the high road, three shops and the *Lion d'Or*. There was not even a railway station—I had completed the journey on an autobus.

I walked into the shed. There was an atmosphere of gloom, and several cars, with various portions of their insides missing, appearing incredibly forlorn. Apart from those, and a workbench at one end, there was nobody.

I walked out again and went round to the back. The double doors of the outhouse were open, and inside I saw three men talking around a racing car.

Ah—it was a beautiful thing, that racing car. In the days to come I was to know it better, but I shall never forget the impression the first sight of it made upon me. I, Hercule, am an artist. An artist can see beauty in many

different things and in many ways—and this was something new to me.

But nevertheless I exclaimed in wonder. Here was a miracle of craftsmanship. There was practically no coachwork—only two bucket-seats on a chassis, but the beauty lay in proportion and line and the exquisite finish of every piece of metal.

At the sound of my voice the three men looked up.

"Good afternoon," I said politely. "I am Hercule. I think your cousin Robert—" and I looked to see which one would be Jules.

The big man in greasy overalls gestured with his thumb.

"This is Jean-Jean," he remarked.

The small man, who still wore his cap and goggles was not to be outdone.

"And this is Grand-Jean," he said.

The third man, who had been frowning over one of the front wheels, looked up and smiled.

"And I am Jules," he said, and in his remark and his smile there was the simplicity and the charm of a child. "These are my two helpers, devoted and faithful. We were expecting you—go on up to the house. My wife will give you something to eat. I am busy now. Tell her I shall be late."

I started to thank him, but when I saw that I was talking to the air I stopped. I was already forgotten. I did not exist. The front brake was pulling to the left. That was the only thing of importance.

And there in a nutshell you have the character of Jules. I grew to love him. One could not help loving him. He was *un être impossible*, if ever there was one, but one had to love him.

I loved him, and I betrayed him. I make no excuses. That is not my way. I shall tell you how it happened, and

you can judge. But it makes me sad to think of him. I was tempted, and the temptation was greater than myself.

And in my sadness there is a fear, and a wonder, and something which seems a memory, for I have the unaccountable feeling that something terribly similar once happened before.

2

It was inevitable that I should find myself sitting at a table in the *Lion d'Or*, my bag beside the chair and my precious umbrella standing up against another one.

Robert had only given me the address of the garage, and to ask Jules where his wife lived would have obviously been a waste of time, since he would not have heard me. There was much more chance of finding out at the *Lion d'Or*.

Also I had no wish to spend several hours in conversation—since he had said he would be late—with a strange woman. I did not know what this wife of Jules would be like. Besides, my bag was heavy, and the strain of treating my umbrella with a care and a reverence I had never before accorded to such an article was beginning to tell upon me in my weakened condition, and altogether it was not surprising that I had worked up a thirst of truly noble proportions.

The *patron* looked at me with a gloomy and speculative eye, and turning round, reached up for the *absinthe*.

"Oh no," I said, "bring me *cing-décis* of your local wine—your *vin du pays*."

He put the bottle back and looked at me again with an infinitesimal lightening of his gloom.

"*Bien M'sieu.*"

He brought me a carafe of something whose appearance

and colour were, to say the least of it, unappetising, but which turned out on closer acquaintance to be an excellent white wine something like Neuchatel.

I invited him to share it with me, and bought another one. By the time he brought up the third—which with an insistence I thought praiseworthy, he insisted on paying—he was almost cheerful.

“Tell me,” I said, “where does Jules Lafarge live—the one who keeps the garage.”

He looked past me attentively. I suspect he saw more than one of me, but he kept his attention rigidly fixed on the extreme left.

“Jules Lafarge lives in his garage—tee-hee.”

I thought for a moment. Then I saw the joke and laughed as well. This pleased him, and he laughed again. I laughed once more, out of politeness. He continued to laugh. He roared and slapped his thighs. I poured myself out another drink and waited for him to talk.

At last he subsided.

“But Madame Lafarge—she lives in the last house on the left as you leave the village. You can’t mistake it—standing well back from the road.”

“Thank you. This is a very good wine.”

“Yes. But be careful. My father told me it is stronger than it seems. He taught me everything I know. I have seventeen *tonneaux*. Numbers one to five are very old. My father said so, and he ought to know. He was inn-keeper here before me. Are you staying here long?”

“That depends,” I told him.

He eyed me wistfully.

“We have been drinking Number Sixteen. Numbers one to five are very strong—and much better. So my father always said.”

“I am very pleased to hear it.”

“You are a man after my own heart.”

" You too," I assured him. " But I think I had better go now—you see, I am expected. But I will come back one evening, with the greatest pleasure, and——"

" And we can try Numbers one to five," he finished triumphantly.

" That," I told him, " is just what I was going to say."

I stood up. My bag seemed extraordinarily heavy.

" What you said about your wine," I began, and then stopped. I noticed that his expression had changed.

" Yes? "

" Was quite true."

" I know. That is why I am habitually miserable. It lifts you up—that is undeniable. But by Ste. Ménéhouldie, it lets you down too—twice as far."

" I see. That," I told him, " is a thing worth knowing." And I went out.

3

My bag was heavy. The village seemed interminable. And my knee had begun to ache. Moreover, the *patron* was quite right about his wine. So he should be—for did he not live above seventeen barrels of the accursed stuff, with unlimited opportunities of sampling them?

It was with relief that at last I banged on the door.

" You are late—very late," said a voice in frank disgust.

I blinked a little. Mind you, I am the first to admit that I was late, but on the other hand, I did not see how I could in fairness be accused of such a thing, since my time was my own to spend how I wished, and besides, I had not said I would arrive at any specified time.

" And you reek of wine," the voice continued.

That was undeniable. I blinked again, and then looked

at the fierce old lady who was regarding me with such a hostile expression.

I opened my mouth, but she gave me no chance to speak.

"Have you got the sausages?"

This was too much.

"No I have not," I told her. "And you are much older than I thought."

She gasped.

"What do you mean?"

"You are old enough to be his mother—not his wife."

"Who?"

"You know very well."

"But I am his mother. And why did you forget the sausages?"

"It doesn't matter," I told her, wearily picking up my bag and umbrella, for by now I realised what had happened.

I had come to the wrong house. That fool of a *patron* had said the last house as you leave the village. I had left the village all right, but by the wrong end.

Once again I tramped that accursed street, my knee aching more and more, and my bag getting heavier and heavier. At last I came to the end house.

4

I looked into the eyes of Annette Lafarge and saw that they were unhappy. Then she smiled, and I marvelled at her beauty.

"Come in, M'sieu Hercule," she said. "I have been expecting you."

Her voice was gentle, and infinitely kind.

"Leave your bag here in the hall," she went on,

opening a door. "And come in here. You must be tired. I will show you your room later."

I found myself sitting in a comfortable armchair with my foot on a hassock—to rest my knee, so I was informed—with a glass of Dubonnet in my hand. Facing me, on a low stool, sat the wife of Jules Lafarge.

"I have a message for you, Madame," I began, when I had tried to thank her and she had ignored my protestations.

"Yes?"

I looked at her. The last rays of the afternoon sun glinted in her hair and picked out threads that were like burnished copper. I sighed.

"I have forgotten it."

She laughed. I think it was the first time that she had laughed for a long time—a very long time. When she laughed her eyes nearly closed, and their sorrow and pain were hidden, and she looked like a child. As she laughed I remembered the message. But I did not say anything. I joined in her laughter. I felt that for once she should think of other things.

"Robert wrote to you then, Madame?"

"Yes. He told—he told us all about you."

"What did he say?"

"Ah no. It was in confidence—pages and pages of it."

Again she laughed at the consternation in my face.

"He said that your knee made you feel very helpless—and very irritable."

"Helpless—yes. Irritable—no. I could not be irritable here with your kindness."

"That is a very nice thing to say. But it is time you had someone to look after you."

I turned the words she had said over and over in my mind and thought about them, and as I thought there came other thoughts, thronging in swift succession through

and after them. I knew that I was weak and that my knee still ached, and that I had overtaxed my strength in getting there, and I felt sad and I knew that I was lonely. And at the same time I could feel that now I could know peace, that now I could relax and be tranquil at my ease.

There had only been two trivial incidents so far. She had waited before taking me to my room, knowing that it would have tired me to climb the stairs, and she had insisted on putting a hassock beneath my foot. That was not much. And yet as I sat sipping the Dubonnet, it seemed that her kindness flowed out to reach and break over me like a wave, with a wave's slow tranquil surge and the inevitable majesty of a wave.

" You are very kind, Madame."

And then for a long while we did not say anything.

Suddenly she looked at the clock.

" Jules should be home soon."

I set my glass down.

" I have remembered, Madame. I called in at the garage on the way here. Your husband said that he would be late. He is very busy."

She looked down at her hands.

" Is there anything I can do, Madame? " I said gently.

She looked straight into my eyes.

" No—no. I will get the supper. We can have it together—that will be nice."

And as she hurried from the room I saw that her lip was quivering.

" She has courage, that one," I muttered to myself, as I reached out for the bottle of Dubonnet. " What sort of a *ménage* is this into which I have landed? "

But I soon gave up thinking. It was an excellent Dubonnet which the good Jules had paid himself. It

absorbed the bitterness of that potent *vin du pays* and stole around the very roots of my belly in a warm and comforting glow.

5

She made me an excellent supper. I do not remember what I ate, for the good Jules apparently had a vintage Pommard which was *extra*.

I pressed her to keep me company. She refused.

"No, thank you. I never touch it—except on special occasions."

"This is a special occasion. You are dining with Hercule."

She smiled bravely. She allowed herself to be persuaded. She drank half a glassful. Then she suddenly burst into tears, knocking the other half on the floor.

M'sieu, as you know, I have a heart as tender as that of a child. You will believe me when I tell you that my heart bled—not only at the sinful waste of that exquisite Pommard, but at the sight of this so beautiful woman in distress.

With a tact and a delicacy which other and lesser men would never have known, I first of all fetched another glass from the sideboard. Mercifully the sound of her sobbing drowned the splintering crash due to my exploratory fumbling and permitted me to shut the door swiftly on the havoc I had caused inside, with one whole glass in my hand.

I filled it slowly and carefully. Then I stuffed my mouth hastily with several large lumps of meat and a few slices of bread, since it was obvious to me that I, Hercule, in this situation, would need a clear head.

I waited a little longer, to give her time to compose herself, and then made my voice gentle.

"Since I am going to be here, Madame, for some time—suppose you tell me what is wrong?"

"It is nothing. I am being foolish."

"We are all foolish. It is only the gods who are wise."

"And cruel."

"That may be. But we are speaking of Annette Lafarge, and not of hypothetical omnipotents."

She was silent for a long time. I hastily took the opportunity of eating a few more slices of bread and a few more lumps of meat, to say nothing of a hunk of cheese and some pickles, and resolutely kept my eyes away from the bottle of Pommard. All the time my jaws were busily masticating I was waiting, quite calmly, for her to speak. I knew I need not say anything more.

"Tonight is no different from other nights—but I wanted him to be home. It is not correct that he should stay away when you are here. Ah—but you must think me disloyal to speak to you—a stranger—of my husband, but you are so kind and so sympathetic——"

"Sometimes it is good to speak of bad things," I told her. "There is a relief in mentioning them."

"Yes—but here there is nothing bad. It seems—it seems that it is the shadow of something beautiful—something that has been twisted and torn, and put in the wrong place. We love each other. I love him all the time. He loves me when he has time. But I am no longer the first thing in his life—I am the second."

"What is the first?"

"His work."

"And can you not be content—to be second?"

"You do not know very much about women, M'sieu."

"Maybe not. But I know about men—and about work. And I think I know your husband already, Madame. He spoke a dozen words to me today, and by what he said and the way he said it, I know him."

"I thought I knew him—once. That was why I married him. It was not too bad at first. He and his brother Justin were just the same—but then he could leave things to Justin and know that they would be done. They were two of a kind. And then Justin was killed round the houses at Monte Carlo—and since then Jules has done two men's work."

"Perhaps he feels that he must. Is it so impossible for you to understand that?"

"Yes—but I am his wife."

"Only one part of a man goes to his wife, Madame. There are other parts—sometimes a wife lives with them all her life and does not know them."

"Of late I have not even a part of him," she said sadly. "I hardly ever see him."

"You must be patient. He will not always be so busy."

"That is what I said to myself—a long time ago."

I poured myself out another glass of Pommard, drank it and refilled the glass. After all—I had eaten half a loaf and most of the joint, and I was getting thirsty. And I had no compunction in slaking my thirst. Assuredly, a man who owned such a cellar and such a wife, and who spent his evenings in a garage, must be either a fool or a madman. I, Hercule, would shoulder his obligations.

"Sometimes," she continued, "I wish that all his work would end in disaster—that the car would be wrecked or something. He has been so successful—and he is certain to win the race at Le Mars. And I ask myself—is that as important as our love? Sometimes I—I almost find myself praying that he will lose. Failure perhaps would send him back to me. Surely success should make a man more tolerant—more understanding?"

"With some men—yes. With the artists of this world—no. Success is just another gate—like failure. The road leads on."

She looked at me for a long time, and then suddenly she smiled.

"I believe now what you said to me before."

"What was that?"

"That you know about men."

"I have had to deal with many types. To learn always—that is to live."

She smiled wistfully.

"I wish I could learn. I only know that I am unhappy."

Now when a beautiful woman tells you she is unhappy, M'sieu—there is only one thing to do. I reached for the bottle of Pommard.

"Madame—" I began.

But at that moment she started up.

"Oh—but I am ashamed—to keep you up talking for so long. You must go to bed at once—you must rest your knee."

"Yes, but—"

"Now do not argue—I shall be your nurse—"

"I know but—"

"And thank you from the bottom of my heart for listening to me so sympathetically—"

"It was nothing—"

"Oh but it was. You have been so kind—"

"Anyone would—"

"Ah no—it has done me good already to speak about all my troubles. We shall have another talk tomorrow—"

"Yes—but tonight—"

"Tonight it is late. You must rest your knee. I will take your bag upstairs."

I gave it up.

I finished the bottle of Pommard and went to bed. There I rested my knee.

6

In the morning I awoke with a start and looked around the unfamiliar room in bewilderment. Then I saw my umbrella, loosely rolled and bulging, standing in a corner, and I remembered.

I remembered that I was Hercule, and that I had in my possession a picture worth hundreds of thousands of francs. And also that I did not know what to do with it. Moreover, that I had come here to decide precisely that thing, what I was going to do with it.

Then there came a knock on the door, and Annette, clad in a *peignoir*, entered the room, carrying a tray with coffee and croissants, and I realised that my umbrella would continue to stand up in the corner, and my problem remain unsolved, for I had other things on my mind.

Mind you, I did not get excited. I did not rave or curse, or deride the gods who were thus mocking me. That is not the way of Hercule. No—I accepted the situation with equanimity, as became one of my philosophical character, and decided to tackle only one problem at the time.

For that, after all, is the most that any man can do. And I have found in the course of my varied life, that it is quite enough. And sometimes, if a man confronts the immediate problem with courage and dignity, and strives his utmost with what tools the gods have given him, he finds that by solving one he has solved many. And even by attempting to solve one with a good heart, he finds that the others existed only in his imagination.

That being the case, I tackled the coffee, because it looked nice and hot, and I dislike cold coffee.

She told me that Jules had already gone to work, but that he would be pleased to see me at the garage.

And so, as soon as I was dressed, to the garage I went.

As before, the front part was deserted. There was a car outside, but it was empty. As I walked round to the back I felt thankful that I was not the owner of one of those partially dismantled automobiles inside. Somehow I had the feeling that I would have to wait a long time before I drove my car again.

As I approached the outhouse I heard voices.

"Well—and now you have seen it, M'sieu Lupin—what can I do for you?"

"What—oh yes. I called in just to confirm a few facts. This is the car you have entered in the 24 hours race at Le Mans next week?"

"It is."

"You are the owner?"

"Yes."

"And the drivers?"

I stepped forward and peered round the door. Jules and his two mechanics were talking to a very smartly dressed individual whom I did not know. Grand-Jean was balancing a spanner between his finger and thumb. It was a heavy spanner, but it seemed very small and light in his huge hand.

"What do you want, M'sieu?" he asked very gently.

M. Lupin—for I presumed that was the individual's name—suddenly appeared to notice the proximity of the spanner to his head. M. Lupin took a step backwards, but drew himself up with dignity.

"As a steward of the Permanent Circuit of the Sarthe," he explained, "I usually make a point of visiting all the entrants for the great race."

"That is extremely kind of you, M'sieu," put in Jules. I glanced at him quickly, but his face was inscrutable.

"Not at all—not at all."

M. Lupin looked around the workshed.

"All this I could have learnt from your entry-form,

but I was interested. To compete with the cars from the great makers—to challenge the best of them—ah that—that takes courage. That is magnificent. I admire you. I sympathise with you. I am your friend. It takes a good deal of money, of course—such a hobby ? ”

And he waved his arm at the car. Jules nodded.

“ That is our chief difficulty. But once we have won the race—things will be easier.”

“ No doubt. I will remember you. I may be able to be of some assistance to you. I will see you again before the race. Good-morning, gentlemen.”

M. Lupin bowed. M. Lupin backed himself out. I came in. We all said good-morning.

“ I am sorry I did not see you last night——” began Jules.

I waved my arm magnanimously.

“ You have no need to apologise—you are a busy man. Madame your wife looked after me, and sent me to bed early.”

He laughed.

“ I know. How is your knee now ? ”

“ Much better, thank you.”

We heard the sound of M. Lupin’s car.

“ What did he want, that one ? ” I asked.

Jules laughed again.

“ He says he is a steward of the Sarthe.”

“ I do not trust him,” said Grand-Jean. “ He has the eyes of a fox.”

“ If he is a steward of the Sarthe,” put in Jean-Jean, “ I will eat my spanner.”

“ You can save your teeth,” said Jules. “ He is no more a steward than my boot.”

Then he beckoned to me and we went out to sit in the sun. I gave him a cigarette, and for a while he smoked

in silence. Then suddenly he threw it away, as though he had made up his mind.

"I suppose you are wondering what it is all about. Well—I will tell you. I like you, Hercule—Robert has written to me saying what a good friend you have been to him, and my wife spoke very highly of your conduct. I am very glad you have come to stay with us—you will be company for Annette. Poor child—I am afraid I do not spend much time with her these days."

Here he sighed profoundly. I did not know what to say, so I gave him another cigarette.

"You see—this is a dangerous game I am playing. I am alone—and when one is alone one is weak. Winning a race is no longer a simple matter, as it was in the old days. Too much depends on it now—too many people have a stake in it. And there is too much money involved. You know what happens to men's natures when money is involved."

I smiled. Perhaps my smile was bitter, or possibly it was just weary, because he looked at me strangely. But I did not say anything and he continued.

"I am alone. But I—or rather my brother Justin and I—we made this car together—alone and in our spare time. And we have got something good. My brother—he is dead now—was a genius. It has a new kind of gearbox with a gear on it which he called an overdrive. Ever since he died I have been trying to get enough money together to patent it, for that was his wish. It is revolutionary—I do not dare to talk about it, or show it to anyone, because they will copy the idea. I do not want the money so much—although I have a reason for needing that, but I feel it is right that Justin's idea should be patented in his name."

"I agree with you," I told him. "Why do you want the money?"

He spoke as shyly as a boy.

" It is for Annette—to give her all she deserves. Look, Hercule—I have neglected her. I cannot help it. There is so much to do, and so little time to do it in. It is my whole life, this racing—but I am prepared to give it up as soon as I have won this race next week, and collected enough money to take her away. Then I shall devote the remainder of my life to her and to making her happy."

He spoke with sincerity. I could see that he loved her very dearly.

" But sometimes when I am working late, all alone in the workshop, it seems that Justin comes to stand beside me, and then I know that I must go on. At least I must go on working until I have patented his gear-box, for it is right that the world should recognise what a genius he was. You do not blame me, do you, Hercule ? " he asked anxiously.

" No. I do not blame you. I think that is what I should try to do myself."

" Good. But things are not easy. I am fortunate in those two helpers of mine—they are loyal and true. I have not paid them any wages for months. We just go on working, night and day—there is always something which can be done to make the car run better. We just go on working—and hoping—and praying."

" And what about this Lupin ? "

" He is just another spy—I could smell him a kilometre away. You see, the big people have so much at stake over these races—contracts and sub-contracts and advertising and so on—that some of them become entirely unscrupulous. They will do anything—bribery—violence—arson—even murder, to enable a certain car to win. Ah—it used to be a noble game. Now it stinks."

He spat. I could see he was profoundly moved.

" But what will he do ? "

"Him—oh—he will probably offer us money to lose."

"But then—why not take it? You will have the money to spend on Annette and—"

He stood up. For a moment I thought he was going to hit me.

"You do not understand, Hercule," he said at last with a great dignity in his voice. "That car in there is more than a car—it is the dreams and ambitions and hopes of two men. It is what we believed in. It was our work—and now it is mine. To me it represents the ideas that Justin believed in—it is up to me to make them practical. I am surprised you should suggest such a thing."

I hastened to reassure him.

"Do not excite yourself, friend Jules," I told him. "I asked you that deliberately. I wished to see what manner of man you were—but I already knew. Now I am sure. I am with you. I will help you."

"Ah—that is good. I thought those words did not sound like Hercule—the friend of Robert my cousin. I shall be glad of your help. This Lupin in himself is a nobody—it is the man who employs him who is dangerous."

"And who is that?"

"You would not know him. He is a South American millionaire named Perez. He made a fortune there, and has come here to spend it. Racing is his hobby—but he cannot bear to lose. He is an evil man to cross."

I stood up. The fear that had come into his honest face was not a good thing to see.

"I have met evil men before," I told him, "and I have found *le bon Dieu* fashioned them much the same as you or I. Talk to them and they listen. Show them something and they look. Stick a knife into them, and they bleed. Kill them, and they die."

"That is true," said Jules.

"Of course it is true," I told him. "I, Hercule, am here to help you—come inside and show me what to do."

7

We went into the outhouse, where the sleek low car seemed to cower down on the ground. The two mechanics had gone to the garage, Jules went up to the car and lifted the bonnet.

"There—see," he exclaimed, and his voice was that of a father speaking of his child. "The engine was originally one of the last experiments of Vinot Deguingand—we bought it cheaply after their bankruptcy. Other parts we have salvaged from wrecks and dismantled cars—but everything we have taken down and re-assembled. Some parts we have made ourselves. We assembled the gear-box ourselves—three months on the bench after we had the parts made to our specification."

He went on talking. The fact that I was there was of no importance. His expression was that of a priest holding up an infant above the font. He was a man inspired.

I let him talk. I knew it would do him good. When he stopped for breath I pointed to a different part, and off he went again.

The time passed pleasantly enough. I like to see a man happy. There is enough misery in this world. To see a man able to create, and proud of what he has created, is to me a noble sight, and a change from all the unpleasant things my eyes are compelled to endure.

He stopped. He looked at me.

"Do you understand about automobiles, Hercule?"

"Not very much," I told him. "I can drive though."

He smiled pityingly.

"Along a road?"

"If I can drive an express train at one hundred and seventy kilometres an hour—I can drive a car on a track."

"Ah—you are speaking of two different things."

"Maybe. But the principle is the same. In both cases one must be prepared to break one's neck. The rest follows logically."

He laughed. I like to hear Jules laugh. I had the feeling that he did not laugh enough.

"Now tell me what I can do," I said, taking off my coat.

Jules scratched his head. Then he led me to the bench.

"See—here is the dynamo. Clean the commutator brushes and the contacts for me, while I go and see how the others are getting on. Then I will put it back and we will go home to lunch."

I found a piece of rag and set to work. I was determined that he should be satisfied with what I had done, so I found a bottle of petrol and used that liberally. When at last I finished I was pleased with myself. I felt that I had done something really well.

Jules came hurrying back. His nostrils quivered like those of a hound ;

"What on earth——"

"I am sorry—I upset your bottle," I told him. I suddenly had an uneasy feeling that perhaps petrol was not the right stuff to use on a dynamo.

It was not very long before my feeling became a conviction. Jules, his large and greasy fingers manipulating nuts and bolts with a wonderful delicacy, had the dynamo back in place in a matter of moments.

"Just start up to make sure she is charging," he muttered, and swung the handle.

The engine started with a smooth roar. The dynamo burst into flames.

I stared at the dynamo in horror, and at Jules in dismay as he leapt to the switch. He cut out the engine, but we could not extinguish that dynamo for a long time. The insulating mica between the contact strips burnt excellently since I had been liberal with the petrol.

Jules looked at me.

"You cleaned it with petrol," he declared accusingly.

"Yes," I said penitently. "I am very sorry—I did not know."

"But a child would know," he bellowed. "An infant at its mother's breast would know that a dynamo sparks and that petrol is inflammable."

"I am sorry," I repeated. "I will buy you a new dynamo."

He looked at me. And then suddenly he roared. I laughed too. I was glad to hear Jules laugh. I felt that laughter had not held its rightful place in his life.

CHAPTER VI

I

THAT evening Jules was again late.

I sat at the table with Annette, and we talked long after we had finished eating. I remember still the way she looked at me, and the eagerness with which she listened to my words, which gave me the impression that I was saying something important. And I remember the glow from the lamp, shining on the coppered brightness of her hair.

At lunch she had laughed to hear the tale of Hercule and the dynamo. Now she was sad again, with that sadness which dwelt behind her eyes and had no place there. I felt it upon me to comfort her.

"With a man like Jules," I told her, "you must be patient. He is not like other men. He is an artist, that one—you have only to look at what he has made out of someone's old engine and a few spare parts. It is fantastic.

"He is an artist—and that means that in his mind there are schemes and plans, and a frenzy of ecstasy, and a blind unreasoning urge that will not let him relax until he has conquered every difficulty—and an unease that will never be still, because it is his very nature. All this is in his mind—as well as you."

"I know. That is what I cannot accept."

"That is what you must accept. When he has finished he will come to you. Perhaps he will come before—that depends on how his work uses him. But when he comes you must be ready."

"Why?"

"Why?" I echoed, and reached for the Pommard. "Why—because—because he loves you, and needs you, and he is working so hard for you."

"He is working for himself."

"In the sense that he is working to make his dreams come true—yes. But his dreams are all of you. He told me so—this morning. When the race is over he is going to give it all up."

She laughed, and it was not a laugh I liked to hear.

"He said that last year—and the year before."

"Then his car was not finished. Now it will be different."

She looked at me for a long time.

"I only know that I am tired of waiting for him. I feel that I am standing still, and life is going by."

"Let it go," I said. "Other people—other things—what do they matter? There is only one person of importance—and that is you."

"I know—that is why—"

"But not you because of yourself. You in what you are capable of doing."

"I do not understand."

I drank some more of Jules' Pommard. After all, I was keeping his wife company, so I argued to myself that to provide the wine was the least he could do. Besides, it was an excellent wine. It was making me eloquent.

"Your husband," I told her, "will never know happiness as other men know it, or as a woman understands it. He has what we call a *feu sacré*. At the most he can have a fugitive peace, a sense of fulfilment, a moment of tranquillity. You can do so much to prolong that moment—to make it into a memory for him which will endure and give him courage to go on."

"And then I shall be alone again?"

"You need never be alone. He will always be with you, since he is the type that loves one woman and worships her."

"And forgets her."

"You are bitter, Madame."

"I have reason to be. He is wasting my life."

"You are helping him. And he is keeping faith with the dead—which is a thing so few of us have the strength to do, since the dead never remind us, but we can tell ourselves each day that it does not matter, since they are no longer here to see what we do."

She looked at me strangely.

"Why do you defend him?" she asked.

I drank and refilled my glass.

"There are several reasons. I like him. And I do not like to see grief and sorrow—I have had too much of them in my own life. And I do not like to see anyone as beautiful as you with such unhappiness in her eyes."

"You have been very kind, M'sieu Hercule. I want you to know how grateful I am."

"It is nothing, Madame."

"Oh—but it is. I may not agree with you—I have brooded so much that probably I cannot reason any more, but none the less I know you are trying to help."

"That was my intention, Madame."

She caught my hand.

"I know—that is why I am so grateful. I have been alone for so long. You have made me forget—just by talking to me."

There were tears in her eyes as she leant closer to me. I could smell the fragrance of her hair. Suddenly a great and terrible temptation caught me in its merciless grip and I knew that before it I was as weak as a child.

I pushed the bottle of Pommard carefully out of the way with my other hand, because there was still some wine in it.

Then the front door opened and banged shut, and I heard voices.

"Come in—come in," said the voice of Jules. "I expect they are still sitting round the table. Of course not—no trouble at all."

Annette caught up a dish and disappeared into the kitchen. The door opened and Jules burst in.

"Here he is. Hercule—here is a friend of yours—just got off the last bus and came straight to the garage asking for you."

I looked at him. I looked behind him. I looked into the beady black eyes of Jou-Jou the Rat, and I felt that I was going to be sick.

"*Salut, Hercule,*" he rasped.

"*Salut, Jou-Jou,*" I replied civilly enough, for whatever

one's emotions, it does not do to betray them to a Rat of that type.

"Annette," bawled Jules at the top of his voice, "something to eat."

He turned to Jou-Jou.

"You will join us, of course?" he asked politely, good-hearted fellow that he was. Ah—I could have wept for him and his innocence. Does one invite a hungry tiger or a venomous snake into one's house?

Does one, having married a beautiful woman, leave her at home and neglect her, and then rejoice that a man has come to keep her company? Ah—he was like a child, that Jules. He had no place in this wicked world. My heart bled for him. My heart froze at the thought of that evil *apache* sitting at the same table as the beautiful Annette. My heart still surged with all the emotions awakened by the touch of her soft hand.

Altogether, M'sieu—to put it quite simply, my heart was in a bad state, what with its bleeding and its freezing and its surging, and above all the fear of that wicked man which caused it to beat faster than it had ever been designed to go.

I watched him. It must have been the helpless stare of a rabbit before a snake. Oh—I admit it. I am not ashamed to speak the truth. Normally, I would have conquered my fear and outwitted him, as I had done before, full of confidence at my own abilities and his mediocre intelligence. Normally, I would have risen above the paralysing effect he always had on me.

But that night it was different. I had never expected him. I was occupied with other things. I was in a state of turmoil, which is not conducive to calm and passionless reasoning.

But Jou-Jou surprised me.

"No thank you," he replied with what was for him

great politeness. "I had something to eat at the station. I will not disturb you for long, M'sieu—I only wish to have a few words with my friend Hercule."

I arose from my chair with alacrity.

"Then we will go into the front room—with your permission, Jules."

"Naturally—take your friend there."

We went inside and I shut the door.

"Now look here—" I began aggressively.

Jou-Jou just watched me. His hand had gone to his hip-pocket, and he kept it there, as though he were going to take out a cigarette case. I swallowed. I knew what he kept there. I knew that it was not a cigarette case.

I knew that I would have to be careful. Of what use would I be to Annette with a knife-haft sticking out from my belly?

"How did you know I was here?" I finished, in quite a different tone. I knew that with this Rat I would have to tread another path, a more difficult one. I knew that I would have to outwit him, so that he never knew who was responsible.

"Your friend Robert—after a little persuasion and encouragement—was only too pleased to tell me what I wanted to know," replied Jou-Jou.

"You did not hurt him?"

"What if I did?" snarled that wicked man, with an evil look in his beady black eyes. "What would you do then?"

"I would kill you," I answered quietly.

"*Ta gueule*," he sneered, but I noticed that he did not look at me, but went on talking quickly. "As a matter of fact, what I did was to buy him a few drinks. The rest followed naturally."

I sighed. I knew that he was speaking the truth. For a moment I had felt brave. Now I felt normal again. I

wondered what it was that had given me such courage, if only for a brief moment, if only for a little while.

Jou-Jou was still watching me. I sat down. He took his hand from his knife and perched himself on the table.

"What have you done with my picture, friend Hercule?" he asked.

I spoke to him patiently and slowly, as one would to a child—to a backward child.

"If I had this picture," I said, "would I have come here—to such a *patelin*—to get rid of it? Would I have asked Robert for the address of his cousin—to show him a picture? Would I have asked Robert, knowing full well that with a bottle of wine in front of him he would tell you everything?"

Jou-Jou scowled, and rubbed his finger raspingly against his blue jowl.

"It does seem strange," he admitted, "but then why did you deceive me—why did you leave the hospital before you said you would?"

"I did that deliberately. I wanted to be alone."

"Why?"

"Because I am ill. All that infection in my leg has poisoned me. I am weak."

"Bah—your tongue appears as virile as ever."

"My tongue," I reminded him, "is but a small portion of my body."

He became coarse. I ignored him. When he had finished I spoke again.

"I thought we had all this out before—is this persecution never going to end?"

"It will end when I am satisfied," he growled.

"But when are you going to be satisfied? What has made you suspicious now?"

"The fact that you ran away instead of having that little talk with me——"

"But we are having it now——"

"And the fact that you came here——"

"I came to Avenches because Jules——"

"And Avenches is near Le Mans and to Le Mans for the race will come Perez——"

"Who is Perez?"

"And Perez, when he is not racing, is usually buying valuable pictures. And Perez does not ask awkward questions about what he buys, so I have heard. And if you keep on interrupting me I will slit your belly up until it looks like a squashed orange—see?"

"Yes," I said meekly. "I see that you are still suspicious of me—for no reason at all. I do not seem to be able to convince you. You can go upstairs and search my bag and my room if you like. Here is the key of my house——"

"I have already been there."

"You have? I hope you put everything back."

"It was like a pigsty already. You would not make such an offer if you were not sure that you did not have it."

"Of course I am sure. If I have not got it with me—what *au nom du diable* have I done with it? Have I taken it to someone and said: 'Here, look after this for me—it is a valuable picture, without a frame, stolen from the Louvre.' Be reasonable."

I could see that my eloquence was having some effect. I think his suspicion was largely habit. He was so used to blaming me whenever his schemes went wrong that he now did it automatically. Mind you—I will not say that he did not have some justification.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Me? Oh—I intend to stop here for a few days, just to keep an eye on you. My old friend Lupin is somewhere in this neighbourhood—I shall look him up. He may have a job for me, just to pass away the time."

I did not like what I heard, but I kept an impassive expression.

"Where are you going to stay?"

"Is there an inn?"

"Yes—the *Lion d'Or*."

"Right. Come with me and show me where it is."

"But—"

"Do not argue. If you are with me you will not be getting into mischief." And he laughed like a hyena.

I saw that I would have to humour him. I put my head round the door to tell Jules, and together we left the house.

3

There was no one in the parlour of the inn.

Jou-Jou lifted his hand, as though to bang on the counter, but I noticed that the door leading to the cellar was open, and motioned to him to follow me.

We climbed down the stairs very quietly. The *patron* was sitting on a chair, busily rubbing dust and dirt into the seal of a bottle of brandy. His expression of gloom was deeper than ever. He did not have the air of a man happy at his work. He gave one the impression that he hated not only himself, but the task which was occupying him as well.

Beside me, Jou-Jou stiffened like a pointer dog. I felt his breath hot on my neck as he leaned forward. The 1870 label on the bottle was plain to see, but the sealing wax had obviously been new and shining.

Then I heard Jou-Jou give his most unpleasant chuckle. The *patron* looked up.

"Ho-ho, *M'sieu le Patron*—so this is how you spend your spare time, is it? Very interesting—very interesting indeed. Might I ask what it is you are going to put into that bottle, or what is already inside that bottle?"

The *patron* regarded him with an air of passionless gloom.

"Since it is obviously a brandy bottle," he answered pointedly, but without heat, "anyone with the intelligence of a blue-seated ape would not need to ask that question."

And then he stood up. I got out of the way. This, I could see with the greatest clarity, was not my affair.

"And who may you be, M'sieu?" he asked coldly, but still without passion. "And what is your business here? And why do you come down poking your ugly nose into my private cellar here?"

Jou-Jou chuckled again. Alas, it was a dreadful sound, and in it there was neither mirth nor pleasure.

"Here is my card—I am the Tax-Inspector for the *Département, M'sieu le Patron.*"

Oh—he was an evil one, that Rat. Of a wickedness one does not easily masticate. I listened to him with my mouth open. I did not doubt that the card was genuine. How he had obtained it was his business.

"My business," he continued, as though echoing my thoughts, "is to check the tax returns of this village for the past year—and I shall be staying at your inn for a few days, I expect, since it appears to be the only one here. We came down here because it is customary to find an inn-keeper in his inn, waiting to serve his customers. That is the answer to all your questions. And now I will ask you one, *M'sieu le Patron.* Have you ever heard of extortionate profits?"

My heart bled for that unfortunate man. I would have sworn it an impossibility for his expression of gloom to become more profound, but it did. Never have I seen a man look more sad.

I pitied him, from the bottom of my heart. And I grieved lest he think that I had anything to do with the

unfortunate affair, since it was in company of that evil *apache* that he now beheld me. I resolved to take him on one side and inform him at the earliest opportunity of my true status. Alas—I knew that I did not dare to expose Jou-Jou, since he would know at once who had betrayed him. It was obvious that not the slightest doubt rested upon his story, such was his impudence and personality.

The *patron* took us upstairs. He procured a chair, the most comfortable one in the room. He dusted it. Jou-Jou sat down in it. The *patron* went to the cupboard and brought out a bottle of wine and glasses.

Then he began to explain.

"M'sieu," he said, "many years ago I had occasion to buy a 500 litre cask of real vintage brandy. I paid a high price for it—but gladly, because the brandy was worth it. It was excellent brandy. It was more than excellent. It was noble. The vendor swore to me that it was 1870.

"I believed him. One had only to taste the brandy to believe him. Besides—that was my trade. I tasted before I bought.

"But human nature being what it is—and the average individual not having the tastes of a connoisseur—I knew very well that no ordinary client would pay me the price of my brandy if it came from a cask.

"People like to see a label—and a little dirt—and even a few cobwebs. Then they will pay, and cheerfully. They feel then that they are getting something for their money.

"And who am I to deny them what they want? They are my customers. The customer is always right. That is what I was doing just now—preparing for my customers only what they themselves would like to see. Where is there any dishonesty?

"It is not as if I cheated them and stuck on an 1860 label—the brandy is 1870, and there is the label plain to see.

"It is not as if there is any trickery in the business at all—for, as you can see if you come downstairs again, the dirt and the cobwebs I was using came only from the outside of the actual cask, and if people prefer to buy their brandy from a bottle—surely it is permissible to show them some of the authentic dirt and legitimate cobwebs too, since it is such things, as everyone knows, which increases the price of brandy. . . ."

Oh—he was eloquent, that one—believe me, he was eloquent. I have seldom heard a more magnificent peroration. I could see that Jou-Jou's phrase about extortionate profits had aroused him to the very depths of his character.

But it was all in vain.

Jou-Jou just sat there with a very unpleasant smile on his ugly face.

"Take me down into your cellar," he said when the *patron* had finished his tale and he had finished most of that excellent bottle of wine.

They went down together. I followed, although neither of them had asked me. But my heart bled for that wretched *patron* and I felt I ought to be near him, to comfort him if necessary.

He showed Jou-Jou the cask. He pointed out the dirt and the cobwebs. Jou-Jou did not say anything. He just gestured to where a beaker hung on a nail.

The *patron* sighed, and gave him some to taste.

Jou-Jou swallowed a little, and promptly spat a mouthful out on the floor. The *patron* sighed again. I held out my hand, and tasted some, too. But I did not spit it out. I found it very good.

"That is no more 1870 brandy than my——," said

Jou-Jou, naming a portion of his anatomy which could not possibly have had anything to do with brandy.
“I am not a connoisseur—but I don’t have to be.”

And then his voice grew sarcastic.

“And I suppose you purchased the wonderful brandy so many years ago that naturally you have not bothered to keep any record of how much you paid for it.”

“I do not think I have kept the actual invoice,” the *patron* replied civilly. “It was so long ago. But I will try to find it.”

“I think it will be better for you if you can’t,” growled Jou-Jou. “Anyway, when I leave I will take a sample of your brandy with me. And while I am in the village I shall find out what price you charge for a bottle of 1870 brandy. Then I shall examine the tax returns you submitted last year.”

Again we climbed the stairs.

“Bring me something to eat,” said Jou-Jou in a lordly tone.

“*Bien, M’sieu.*”

The *patron* disappeared into the kitchen. I have never seen a man look so sad. I turned to Jou-Jou.

“But you said you had eaten——”

“What does it matter? Have you never eaten twice? I have this one where I want him—it will do him good to bring me something to eat.”

“Well, in that case I will be going——”

“Sit down,” rasped Jou-Jou. “I feel better when I know where you are.”

“But——”

“Sit down.”

I sighed. I sat down. I wondered for what obscure purpose *le bon Dieu* had created Jou-Jou. Doubtless such people have to exist in this world, or else how could our books up above be ruled with a debit and credit side,

according to our dealings with them, but it seemed to me an unnecessary and wasteful method of accounting, since each one of us, however good, has such latent possibilities of evil within us that it seems purposeless to create such abnormalities as that evil Rat.

I sighed again. It was all very puzzling, and somehow sad. Doubtless *le bon Dieu* knew better than I did what He was doing. Let it rest at that.

When he had eaten his fill, Jou-Jou stuck a cigar in his mouth and bawled out at the top of his voice.

"What about some brandy with my coffee, M'sieu *le Patron*?"

His beady black eyes were dancing with an impish merriment.

I closed my eyes. There is an old tale about the last straw on a camel's back. I waited for the dull thud that his lifeless body would make as it sagged limply from the table to the floor.

"*Bien, M'sieu.*"

I opened my eyes. Jou-Jou was still living. More he was still talking.

"And I don't mean what you have in your cask—I mean some real brandy."

It was awful to watch the struggle that wretched man had to control himself. He opened his mouth, and shut it again.

"*Bien, M'sieu,*" he said again. "I have some brandy."

He went down into the cellar. He came back bearing a bottle reverently, as one would carry a new-born child. It was a *cognac* of Napoleon. He wiped the cork and seal, and opened it carefully.

Jou-Jou watched him curiously. Then he sipped his glass, and an expression of awe replaced his habitual scowl. He reached out and took the bottle. Carefully he moistened his finger and rubbed the dirt from the seal and label.

"1811," he murmured in awestruck tones. "I can well believe it. How much?"

"Five hundred francs, M'sieu."

"Leave the bottle with us," said Jou-Jou, still staring at it reverently.

4

Naturally I got back late, and it was not until next morning that I saw Jules at the garage.

"Jules," I told him solemnly, "you must be careful. I smell danger."

He looked at me, and suddenly he smiled.

"I thought I could only smell petrol. Now I know I can smell brandy—and good brandy."

But I soon made him serious. I told him what I thought fit about Jou-Jou. It was not an amusing tale.

"And he told me that he knows Lupin—that *crapule* who appeared here the other day," I concluded, "and he said he might get a job from Lupin."

"That," said Jules, "is bad."

"It is more than bad. It is dangerous. That Rat will stick at nothing if there is any chance of getting some money."

"But I do not see what else we can do. Grand-Jean or Jean-Jean—one of them always sleeps here in the shed. They take it in turns—to guard the car."

"That is a good plan. But what can one man do against a gang?"

"Not much—but what else can be done? They must take it in turns. I can't ask both of them to do it every night. You are not suggesting that I—"

"No—no. You are already doing too much. I would come myself—but with my knee—"

"Of course not. I would not think of such a thing.

But I am glad you are here just the same, Hercule. It is good to have someone on whom I can depend. You see, I have to go to Paris this afternoon. There is some trouble about those new piston-rings we had made—and I can't afford to lose any more time writing letters. I am going there myself—I shall sleep there and be back early in the morning. I am glad you are here. You can keep an eye on things?"

"Yes, of course," I told him. "I will go to the *gendarmerie*. Perhaps we could suggest that the patrolling *gendarme* keeps his eye on the garage."

"That is a good idea. And I will get my army revolver out and give it to the one who sleeps here."

We went on for a long time trying to think out all the precautions we could take, for I admit that the appearance of Jou-Jou had worried me. And the more I thought about it the more I worried.

In addition I felt guilty, because I had come to like Jules. I admired his singlemindedness, his honesty and his strength of character. And if it had not been for me Jou-Jou would never have come into his world—that simple world of hard work and honesty in which he managed so well.

From vermin of the type of Lupin I knew he had nothing to fear. He was capable of taking care of himself, with the help of Grand-Jean's muscles.

But Jou-Jou was a different proposition. In the slums of Paris where he belonged, he was bad enough, but here in this lonely village—the very thought made my blood run cold.

And I felt that it was all my fault. Which, for a man of my nature, was a very disturbing thought.

5

In the afternoon I saw Jules off on the autobus.

Then I went to the *gendarmerie* and arranged what we had decided. Then I sent a small boy with a message to Madame Lafarge, saying that I had important business at the *gendarmerie*, and would not be back until late, and that there was no need to wait up for me.

Ah yes—I thought that was the best thing to do.

Do you not agree with me, M'sieu? I took that temptation by the throat and put it on the ground. Then I jumped on it with both feet. I even gave the small boy five francs, which I could ill afford, to ensure that he appreciated the importance of the message he was carrying.

I reasoned it all out so carefully and so logically. There was nothing that prevented me from enjoying a comfortable evening listening to Annette and trying to comfort her—indeed, I could think off-hand of a dozen worse ways of spending an evening, but Jules had insisted that I help myself to his Pommard—they were his last words as he climbed into the autobus—and I, Hercule, am only human.

I knew only too well what the outcome of it all would be. And therefore I did the wisest thing.

Ah, M'sieu—sometimes I think how the gods up above must laugh—with a deep laughter right down in their bellies—as they watch us poor humans below planning and scheming and trying to work it all out by ourselves. How they must laugh. How it must amuse them when they watch us. For they know exactly what is written—for each one of us, and how much is inevitable, because it is ordained. I am sure they must laugh. But I think it is rather a cruel laugh.

6

"I have come," I told the *patron*, "to sample Numbers one to five."

For a moment his lugubrious countenance looked at me blankly. Then he remembered.

"Ah yes," he said. "I know. But I do not like your friend."

"You are quite right," I told him. "But he is not my friend."

"That is just as well. Because I do not drink with a friend of a tax-inspector."

"You are quite right," I told him for the second time. "I agree with you entirely. But you can drink with me. I am staying, as you know, with Jules Lafarge. This fellow came bursting into the house, and made me come down here to show him the inn. He has a hold over me—he followed me from Paris."

"Ah," said the *patron*.

"Yes," said I.

"That, then, is different."

"Quite different."

"Entirely."

By now we were friends again.

"A hold over you," he repeated thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"Something to do with taxes, perhaps?" he suggested hopefully.

"In a way—yes."

"That is bad."

"That is why I came here. I need the uplift of Numbers one to five."

His expression of gloom began to lighten, until by contrast it almost seemed as if he were smiling. Without

another word he went down to the cellar. In a very short time he re-appeared with a carafe.

"Where is he then?" I asked him.

"Oh—he has gone out. To see a friend."

"Good. I thought he might. I did not wish to meet him here."

"You are a man after my own heart," said the *patron*.

We settled down to drink the *vin du pays*. I did not hurry. There was plenty of time. I was drinking because I liked the wine, because I wished to spend the evening at the *Lion d'Or*, and because I have usually found that the conquering of a temptation is thirsty work. Many men drink for lesser reasons.

The *patron* drank with me. He had a good thirst, that one. With each carafe his gloom grew less. Soon he was smiling. Then he began to laugh.

One or two people put their heads round the door. Some went away at the sound of that laugh. I should think it was an event in the history of Avenches. One or two stayed, to stare at us in amazement.

The *patron* waved his arm largely at them.

"Help yourselves," he declared magnanimously. "Take what you like. Pay for it if you can. But do not interfere with me. I am happy."

At fairly regular intervals, but with more and more difficulty, he disappeared down the stairs, to re-appear with another carafe, each time from a different barrel. The time he took to negotiate the stairs made me apprehensive.

"I suggest," I began.

He looked at me.

"I suggest," I started again.

"Yes, you suggest—"

"That is what I said. I suggest—"

"If you insist."

"Of course I ingest—I mean suggest—I mean do not interrupt me—"

"Have a drink."

"Thank you."

"Not at all."

"You are a man—"

"After my own heart. I know."

Then there was a long pause. It was an excellent wine. Then I tried again. I, Hercule, am not the man to abandon an idea, which I know is good, because I am taking a little wine.

"I suggest—"

"That is what you said before."

"And I say it again."

"Very well. I will listen once more."

"If you did not interrupt—"

"I am sorry."

"I accept your apology."

We drank again. I looked at him.

"I suggest—"

He opened his mouth. I held up my hand. He shut it again.

"That we go down together this time, and each carry up one. That will make one each. One each, since we are two, will make a total of two. Two will be enough, and you need not go down again."

"That," said the *patron*, indistinctly but sincerely, "is a good idea."

We went down. We came up again, each with a couple in our arms. Something in the cellar reminded me of something I remembered, but it was quite a time before I realised what it was.

"How is it," I asked him, "that I find you so cheerful and happy, when through no fault of mine I was responsible for making you so unhappy yesterday."

For a long time he pondered.

"I will tell you," he said. But he did not go on. His mind was far away.

"Your father," I told him, "must have been a remarkable man."

"Yes. He taught me all I know."

"What he said about those barrels was quite true. They are much stronger."

"Yes. And it is because of my father that I am so happy."

"I am glad to hear it. Pray convey to him my felicitations."

"It will be difficult."

"Why?"

"He has been dead for thirty years."

"How can he make you happy then?"

"He taught me all I know."

"You must explain. I find it hard to understand."

He looked at me, and his expression was sly.

"That cask of brandy has leaked. Sometimes when a cask is old it leaks. No one knows why, because the wood should be seasoned and set. But sometimes it leaks. My father told me. It has been known to happen."

"And it has happened?"

"Yes. And that *cognac* of Napoleon—that *crapule* liked it so much he finished the bottle. And he ordered another three today, to take out in his bag. And if he has no evidence he will have to pay his bill here."

"Of course he will. Is this not a civilised country?"

"Yes. But had that cask not leaked, he would never have paid his bill. I know that type. He might have done something else with the bill—indeed it is more than likely. But he would not have paid it."

"But now he will have to."

"Exactly. Now there is no evidence. And one must have evidence."

And now his expression became incredibly sly.

"You see—that *cognac* of Napoleon. It was my father who bought it—more than thirty years ago. He was the inn-keeper here before me. It was he who taught me all I know. . . ."

7

I felt better when at last I stood out in the cold night air.

But as I began to walk down the village street I became more and more sad. It was a wicked wine. Of that there could be no doubt. It lifted you up. That was undeniable. But then it dropped you down, twice as far.

As I walked I knew that I was being dropped down. And I did not like it.

My steps became slower and slower. All the mirth and well-being stole out of me, and in place of that righteous glow there was only a cold emptiness.

I grew morose. More, I became *farouche*. I did not care.

My *moral* was very low. I was being dropped, and I knew that I had reached the bottom.

I opened the door with the key Jules had given me and went straight up to my room.

I sat on the bed, but I did not undress.

Suddenly, with a fierceness that appalled me, that great and evil temptation surged up within me with a terrible swiftness and eagerness, as if rejoicing to find such emptiness to inhabit, such a void to occupy.

It welled up within me and filled me, and became part of me. It surged up inside me when I was weak with the reaction from that accursed wine, and I had no chance.

But I might have been dropped down to the bottom,

but I still had a mind. I could still remember. I, Hercule, am not the man to give up without a fight.

I got to my feet and fetched my umbrella from the corner of the room. I unrolled it desperately, urgently, and spread out the canvas under the light. I felt that it was the only thing that could help me.

For a long time I stared at that beautiful picture. I stared until my eyes filled with tears. Then I wiped them and stared again.

It seemed that all the loneliness in my life came to look at me with compassion from those virgin eyes. It seemed that I saw something which had been myself staring at me with their beauty and their forgiveness and the gentle tolerance of their understanding. But what it had been I only saw remotely and darkly, as if from a great distance, and I grew sad as I looked, for I knew that it was all the years that lay between, like a dark and obscuring cloud.

Perhaps I too had once looked like that. Perhaps that innocence was what my mother had seen in my eyes when she took the hand of the babe she had borne and watched the trusting helplessness of the small fingers curled around her own. Always she had helped, because always she had believed me better than I was. And whatever people told her, she still believed. But all that had been very long ago.

It was the years that lay between which brought me sorrow—the years and all they had meant, and how they had used me, and what they had left. And now it seemed that I looked at something I could hardly see, but which was poignant with the beauty of its remembrance and vivid with the wistfulness of a dream. But the difficulty I had in recognising it and the effort it cost to see it there made me sad, and my sadness grew even greater until I was afraid.

Then I rolled up the canvas, and it seemed that part of me closed up with it, for I knew that the pages had turned, and the book, however long, can only be turned one way.

And then I turned out the light, and softly I went across the landing and opened the door of Annette's room.

CHAPTER VII

I

I AWOKE early and went to the window. The sun had just come up and the whole sky was a blaze of colour.

For a long time I stood there watching it.

"Of what are you thinking?" said Annette from the bed. Her voice was low and very tender.

I did not answer. I was too busy with my thoughts. I watched the beauty in the sky, and listened to other voices, louder and more insistent than hers.

"Hercule—what is it? What is the matter? Of what are you thinking?"

I knew now that I had never loved her. I pitied her. And I admired her courage.

It seemed that over the village the sky was in a deeper glow, a more vivid blaze.

"Tell me what you are thinking about," said Annette.

I answered without turning round.

"Jules."

It was strange how that part of the sky seemed to retain its glow, when all above and around it the soft washes of daylight were obliterating the fierce stain of the dawn.

Suddenly I jumped.

"The garage is on fire," I said, and catching up my clothes, ran out of the room.

It did not take me long to get into my trousers and coat, and in spite of my knee it did not take me long to run down the street to the garage.

I had not been mistaken. It was well and truly alight. I reflected, not without bitterness, that it had only been necessary to start it. There was enough petrol and oil in the place to finish the job properly.

As I ran I wondered why no one had given the alarm ; surely the patrolling *gendarme* or some early riser must have seen the blaze.

And then I remembered that Jou-Jou had gone to Lupin for a job, and whatever Jou-Jou's faults, when he did a job he usually did it well. There was only one fire alarm in the village. It could easily be put out of action. And *gendarmes* are human. They can be bought. And if they argue about money, they do not usually care to bandy words with a knife. Twenty *centimètres* of polished steel, exquisitely sharpened and wickedly alive, make a potent argument.

No, there was no *gendarme*, no one at all, as I reached the garage and rushed round to the back. No one at all. Only myself, and that gigantic blaze.

Suddenly I felt very lonely and afraid. It was a terrible fire, and I thought that Hercule would be well out of it.

But the thought came a little too late. I was already at the doors and I had no time to think.

The bar was across and they were shut from the outside. I snatched up a half-metre tyre-lever and burst the padlock off its ring. A wave of fire and smoke gushed out as I opened both doors, and as I paused for a second I caught a glimpse of a body huddled on the floor.

But I went first to the car. I knew that was what they would all have wished. I released the hand-brake and

pushed it out, well clear of the building. Then I went back for the man, whom I found to be Jean-Jean. As I dragged him out the roof fell in.

I carried him to the car and put him down. He was insensible and badly burnt about the head and hands. As far as I could see the car was undamaged.

I sat down myself and wiped my brow.

I did not feel too well. And I did not know what to do. If I went away for help Jou-Jou might come back. If I stayed he might come back just the same, and I did not think he would be pleased to see me, or rejoice at what I had done.

While I was thus deliberating I solved the problem by fainting.

At least, I suppose that is what must have happened, because I remember nothing more until I suddenly woke up with my face wet and cold, and heard a lot of people around me all talking at the same time.

I did not take much notice. I knew that I was very tired.

But I remember that after a while the crowd parted, and Jules came through to where I sat beside his car. He grasped my hand and wrung it, and in that handclasp I could feel his sincerity and his goodness and his simplicity. And I could feel his emotion and his gratitude.

"Hercule," he stammered, "how can I thank you for what you have done—what can I say to you? You are my friend. I am proud to call you my friend."

I closed my eyes. I could not answer him. I was glad I felt tired. I was glad my face was still wet from the water they had dashed over me.

stay at the suburb of Pontlieue until the day of the race. With Jou-Jou we were taking no chances.

I went with him and Grand-Jean. I felt that perhaps I could help, since it had been through me that all this had happened. And besides, I could no longer stay in his house.

I do not think that Jou-Jou knew where we had gone, because after the fire he kept discreetly out of the way. Indeed, we heard afterwards from the *patron* of the *Lion d'Or* that he had stayed inside until the afternoon, when he paid his bill and left. But by then we had gone. That probably explains why we were left in peace until the race.

He must have known that we were there, because Jules and Grand-Jean went each day to practise on the track. But not even Jou-Jou could attempt anything on the Permanent Circuit of the Sarthe in broad daylight.

We garaged the car at the Sporting Club, and took good care that we were not followed.

When the great day came Jules and Grand-Jean were both confident. I was uneasy. And also I was unhappy.

Before the race I wandered between the tents which are dotted about the lawns for the drivers to sleep during rest hours, and decided to stay with each of them during the night. Then I heard the bugle sound, warning the drivers to take their places. The race was about to begin.

The flag dropped, and the drivers ran towards their cars. Jules was in first, and even as the others started he roared to the front and flashed up the hill.

Grand-Jean was in the pits. I walked along beside the track, and as the cars flashed past me again and again, I saw that Jules was determined to build up a lead.

As I walked through the woods they came round again. Jules was well in front. At the *Tertre Rouge* and out on the main road to Tours he was far ahead and still gaining.

I stayed on the inside bend for some time and watched them all sweep round with screaming tyres and disappear down the straight through the sand and scrub at a fantastic speed.

As I walked on I was deafened. The roar of the engines along here rose to a whine, and the superchargers blew with a scream, and as the cars, large and small—for in this race all categories started together—were all strung out, the noise was unending.

I stopped again at the Mulsanne hairpin and watched with what consummate reckless skill Jules skidded the car round and shot away in and out of the narrow winding curves to the Arnage corner. Ah—he was an artist, that one. He was more than a driver. He was part of his car.

On they went, lap after lap, until my mind began to reel, and I decided to walk back to the pits.

I found Grand-Jean jubilant.

"Aha—you have seen the board? That is a car we made—just let me get in it."

I waited there with him until the low bonnet swung in and they changed over. Jules was tired but happy. They were both confident. For my part, I did not seem to be able to care about winning or losing. I was worried something was going to happen.

Jules went off to the tent. He was asleep before his head touched the rolled-up blanket. I sat down beside him and watched.

My thoughts were confused and bitter. But I continued to think. I knew that I had to resolve the problem.

In the end I decided to take the picture to this Perez—who apparently bought pictures and did not ask awkward questions—and give the money to Jules. He would be able to do what he liked, for whatever people say about money, no one has yet denied its power. He would be able to continue with the work he loved, but as a hobby

and not a necessity, and he would be able to devote his time to making Annette happy.

And I—I would be back where I had started. But at least I would have made some reparation for the wrong I had done him. At least I would have made some effort to pay the debt.

Perhaps in the book above, after that last entry, they would make another one—it did not matter if it were small—on the other side. It did not matter if the figures did not balance—I am afraid in the ledger that is mine not even a supernatural accountant could strike a balance, but at least it would show that I had tried.

And in the end, at the great adding up, perhaps *le bon Dieu* would be merciful and understand.

3

And so it went on, all through the long hot day and into the night, until in my mind there seemed no thoughts at all, but only the crackle of exhausts and the scream of tyres and the throb and roar of engines.

I continued to watch in the tent while each one slept, but the night dragged on and nothing happened.

Jules came back and flung himself down.

"How goes it?" I asked him.

"Ah—what a car," he answered. "It is a dream. Of the result——"

And even as he spoke he was asleep. He had been there about two hours when I heard the sound of running steps and sprang to my feet.

"What is it?"

A torch shone in my eyes and I heard a man panting.

"Jules Lafarge?"

"Yes—he is here."

"If he wants to finish he must come now. His other driver has had an accident."

"Is the car smashed?"

"No—he brought it back. But he cannot go on."

I shook Jules and together we ran back to the pits. The car was there with two or three mechanics clustered round Grand-Jean, who was propped up against the wall, deathly pale in the glare of the headlights.

In a second Jules was beside him.

"What happened?"

"It was at the Arnage corner—the right-angled bend. Someone—someone threw a knife."

One of the mechanics spoke to us.

"I took it out and put a pad. We have sent for the doctor."

"Thank you," replied Jules. "Is it bad?"

"He will not drive again—for a good time, M'sieu." Grand-Jean's lips moved. Jules bent down to him.

"But—but I brought the car back—for you."

And his head fell forward. I thought Jules would catch him, but he was already half-way to the car.

"Check up again," he shouted to the mechanics, "it will save a stop later on."

I made Grand-Jean as comfortable as I could. Before the doctor came the engine roared and Jules was off.

While Grand-Jean was being bandaged and put in the ambulance, I had a look at the knife. It was a plain one with a wooden handle, but I did not expect to recognise it. Jou-Jou was too clever for that. But I was sure he had thrown it.

And it was as I waited there at the pits until the blackness of the night gave way to the pallid light of dawn that I first began to wonder how I could get rid of that evil *apache* Jou-Jou the Rat.

Until now I had regarded him as a necessary evil in

the life of Hercule, something that the gods had sent to try me. I could do nothing against the destiny which decreed that his path should so often cross mine. All I could do was to match my intelligence against his cunning and my ability against his ferocity, and trust that whatever gods had decided we should clash would at least have the justice to record the outcome.

In all our encounters I think I may claim with due modesty that I have held my own. The fact that I am still living should be sufficient proof that I am making no idle boasts.

But this was something different. It may be that my mind was unduly full of Jules—I do not know. It is quite possible. But I suddenly seemed to see, as if for the first time, the hideous evil of an unscrupulousness that would wreck a man's hopes and dreams and ambitions for the sake of a few hundred francs.

The fact that Jou-Jou had twice attempted and nearly succeeded in murder did not, at that moment, seem so important to me.

I have met death in many strange forms and disguises. Perhaps my long association with Jou-Jou has hardened me to it. I do not know. At any rate, I no longer attach such importance to life. It is something which has got to end. If it ends sooner or later—*tant pis*. But to live one's life so that its end can be met any day without regret—ah, that, that is important.

But I had talked with Jules. I had listened to all his hopes and fears and the dreams he had made, and I had watched what his hands had fashioned of those dreams. And that and the way he worked made me feel curiously humble. One could not but respect such a man.

And I felt that it was through me that this evil had come into his life. I felt that it was my fault and that it was my

duty to do something about it. As yet I could not see what, but from that moment I began to think.

And so I stayed there until beneath a clear and cloudless sky the flag dropped and the loudspeaker blared Jules' name as the winner.

4

"When I have slept," said Jules, "I will take you out, Hercule."

"You sleep first," I told him. "That is more important."

I had interviewed the police and answered all their questions concerning the attempt to wreck the car. That is to say, I had furnished them with all the particulars they needed and had denied all knowledge of any previous threats, bribes or intimidations. I was not going to mention the names of Jou-Jou or Lupin. I had something to do—something which I would find hard with a knife-hilt protruding from my belly.

I had to find Perez.

But from the swift efficiency with which they set to work I felt that for a short while at least, we would be safe from that evil Rat. After all, he had obviously contracted to stop Jules from winning the race, and now that he had failed he would be too busy explaining his failure or planning some new villainy to bother us.

So after we had safely garaged the car, I took Jules back to the inn where we were staying and saw him to bed. Then I went to mine, for I could hardly keep my eyes open, but I left instructions that I was to be called after lunch.

It is a strange and sometimes terrifying thought, M'sieu, to reflect upon what trivial happenings our destiny seems to hinge. It seems to me to betoken a plan of such

sweeping grandeur and such magnificent conception and co-ordination that the mind cannot grasp it. To use the thousand small and apparently unrelated acts—to make them all interplay and connect and extend a movement already begun—ah, that—that, shows a grasp of detail and an organisation *fantastique*. It often makes me wonder. And when I wonder I am filled with humility.

Thus—if I had not been called late, everything would have turned out differently. As it was, the maid forgot. Or that was her tale.

But even now, I often wonder—did she really forget? Or did something else happen—unimportant in itself—which made her forget? It is an interesting speculation, is it not, M'sieu? I grant that you would not find many a wheel-tapper indulging in such metaphysical reflections—but then, I—I am Hercule. I am not as other men.

And so she called me late. Very late. So late that lunch was a forgotten memory. So late that I had an empty stomach.

Bear that well in mind, M'sieu. It is a bad thing to drink on an empty stomach. If you have a son and you wish to give him good advice when he goes out into this wicked world—do not waste your valuable time telling him of the facts of life, as so many wise parents do. That is just a waste of time. With a little co-operation from some girl or other, he will soon find out for himself the more important ones. He probably has done so by the time you pluck up courage to speak to him.

Ah no—but tell him not to drink on an empty stomach. That is advice which any son should be glad to receive, and any parent proud to impart. It is invaluable.

Behold me then, dressing in a great hurry. As soon as I was ready, I took my umbrella and set off for the hotel where Perez was staying.

As I went, in spite of the emptiness in my belly, my heart was filled with a brief and fleeting happiness. Was not I, Hercule, about to accomplish a good deed? Was I not about to commit an entirely disinterested action and thereby atone a little for the evil I had done.

Ah—it was a comforting and a soothing thought. That picture, for which I had risked so much, whose beauty had been such a comfort to my artistic sensibilities—that picture which represented wealth and comfort and a tranquil old age to me—that picture was going to be sold. And the money was going to be given to Jules, who would use it more wisely and more nobly than I could ever do.

With that money he was going to bring happiness into the life of Annette. Annette—whose only fault had been that she had loved too much, and to whom the gods had not given enough strength to keep that love or to guard it from all the things in this evil world which always seek to destroy it.

Poor Annette—she had been weaker than the injustice which had come to her. I was glad that she would find the happiness her courage deserved. I hoped that up above they were opening the book at the right page, to record my deed without delay.

But Perez was out. He had taken his car and driven off. No, they did not know where. They had no idea. They were sorry, but they did not know when he would be back.

I came back to earth with a violence that saddened me. How beautiful the dream, how brutal the awakening. Clutching my umbrella, I made my way back to the inn.

Jules was waiting for me at the corner of the road, his honest face beaming with happiness.

“Anyone would think you had been driving—the way you sleep.”

“They forgot to wake me,” I told him. “And besides. I was up all night——”

"I know—I know—you have been a true friend. If it had not been for you—I should never have won this race. And for Grand-Jean too—what other man would have gone on driving with a knife in him? Truly, I am well served by my friends. Come along—we are going to celebrate."

"But let me——"

"Come along—we are late enough as it is. We have a lot to celebrate—and only one evening to do it in. Besides—we must have a talk together."

He slipped his arm in mine and led me away.

5

We sat down in *Les Sept Fils d'Aymon*.

"I," said Jules to the *patron*, "have just won the 24 hours race. Without the help of my friend Hercule here, I could not have done it. Therefore I am taking him out. Therefore we wish to drink some of your best wine. Understand—this is an occasion."

The *patron* bowed until the light shone on his bald and glistening pate.

"Certainly, *Messieurs*," he said, and went on to express his congratulations in a most charming manner. Then he hurried off to his cellar.

"Before we begin," said Jules, "there is something I want to tell you."

"And before we begin," I told him, glancing at my umbrella which I had placed carefully beside my chair, "There is something which you must remind me to remember. It is important."

"Very well. Now first of all—Perez came to congratulate me after the race. And I did not like the look in his eye as he did so. And I do not like what happened while

I was away. And still less do I like what happened to Grand-Jean."

"In fact—you like nothing about the whole business."

"No—except that I won the race. I like that. But Perez made me think. He asked me what I was doing. I told him I was going back to Avenches, to overhaul the car."

"Was that wise?"

"Yes—because we are not going back. He said he would come to see me there. But when he gets there he will not see us."

"Where shall we be?"

"In Italy."

"In Italy?"

"Yes—for the *Mille Miglia*."

The *patron* appeared with a bottle so old and so dusty that it seemed to blink at the light. He carried it as if he were holding a new-born babe. Jules stared at him and then in a hushed voice invited him to drink it with us. Jules was one of nature's gentlemen.

The *patron* bowed. His manners were exquisite. I could see that he was pleased.

Jules drank. I drank. The *patron* drank, but he drank with a knowing air. He knew what he was drinking.

Then, when the bottle was finished, he beamed on us like a father.

"*Messieurs*, he said, "it is a pleasure to welcome such guests. I am honoured. You will honour me still further by having another bottle with me."

We did not argue with him. I do not know how Jules felt, but inside my belly there was a glow—a great and warm and comforting glow. It was as if some giant and soothing hand were tenderly caressing my vitals.

We watched him disappear.

"That," said Jules slowly, "must be a remarkable wine."

"It is," I agreed, "what were you saying when he came up?"

"Oh—yes. I have thought it all out. These men are dangerous. We must get away from here at once and hide in Italy. I want to win the Thousand Mile race next month."

"But you have just won a race—surely the prize-money——"

"I know. But once I have settled my debts and paid Grand-Jean and Jean-Jean all the wages I owe them—and besides—they are both ill——"

He paused, shamefaced. I nodded. I understood. There would not remain much of the prize-money once he had looked after his two friends.

"I will write to Annette and send her some of it," he continued, "and tell her what we are doing."

"No," I said, "tell her we are going to Paris—on business."

"Why?"

"In such a case the fewer people who know the better," I told him.

"I would trust Annette with my life," he answered with simple dignity.

I stared at the table, but I did not see it. My eyes turned inwards and looked deep into the depths of my own heart, and believe me, M'sieu—that is not a good sight for any man.

Then I became aware that he was still speaking. I roused myself with an effort.

"What did you say?"

"I said just one more race, Hercule."

"But what about a driver?" I asked him. "Jean-Jean is in hospital and Grand-Jean will not be able to drive——"

"You will be my driver, Hercule."

"I?"

"Yes. I have faith in you. That is why we are going tomorrow—to practise."

"But—"

"It is not a track. The race is along the road. It is only a question of driving fast on a road—you can do that?"

"If I can drive an express train fast along a pair of rails," I assured him, "I can see no reason why I cannot drive a car fast along a road."

"Of course not. That is all it is—that and a matter of endurance."

"I can endure," I told him, speaking with great confidence, for that warm and comforting glow was still within me. "I can endure for a very long time."

"I know you can. It is only a matter of will-power."

The *patron* re-appeared with a second bottle. Slowly, and with great gravity, we drank it. It was an exquisite wine, and worthy of anyone's respect. When we had finished it I felt in my pocket.

"Though much honour," I said, "might be gained in the drinking of such a wine, the greater honour lies surely with the man who pays for it, and if there is any question of honour at stake, I, Hercule, am not to be outdone by any two of my friends, even though they be two such notables as the winner of the great race and the acolyte of such a sacred wine."

Though I am not the one to say it, I thought that was quite a commendable speech, and although perhaps towards the end I became a trifle involved, the *patron* seemed to be a man of outstanding intelligence, for he divined what was wanted without the slightest hesitation, and descended again into his cellar, although this time his gait was more deliberate and his choice of key more prolonged.

We sat in silence while he was gone. It was a noble wine.

Once more we drank. Then Jules rose to his feet and took me by the arm. The *patron* he kissed, lovingly, upon his bald head.

"It was a holy wine," he declared. "It is only right that the guardian of such a wine be treated with reverence."

Then he led me out into the street. Or perhaps I led him. At any rate, we found ourselves outside.

"Jules," I began, "I will not attempt to deny that I am thankful I had the opportunity of tasting such a wine, but it seems to me that here there is something gravely wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we are out to celebrate. That is a fitting wine to drink at someone's funeral."

"Quite right."

"Therefore I think we should eat."

"A good idea."

"And maybe laugh a little. This life is sad enough without remembering its sorrows when we celebrate."

"What are you talking about sorrows for?" asked Jules suspiciously. "There has been no funeral, has there?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then what are we hanging about for? Come and eat."

We went to another *café* and had a very good meal. With it we had a couple of flagons of Rheims and soon we felt more cheerful. Some of that sun-kissed land of Champagne must have been in those flagons, because soon we felt as though the sun itself were bubbling in our veins.

I leaned back in my chair.

"There is something I am trying to remember," I said to Jules. "Something I asked you to remind me."

"What can it be?"

"That is what I am asking you."

"Perhaps the *patron* would remember."

"How would he know? He does not know me."

"No—the other one. The one who had the funeral."

"Why should he know?"

"He drowned what you were trying to remember in his wine, did he not?"

That was true enough.

"We had better go back to him. I know it was important."

Eventually we found ourselves back at *Les Sept Fils d'Aymon*. We greeted the *patron* affectionately and boisterously. His answer was discourteous.

"Go away. You are devils, both of you."

"It is you who are the devil," I told him severely.

"You are in charge of the devil's own wine."

The *patron* scratched his bald head. His voice became pathetic.

"I was in charge. I was in charge of this *café*. Now I am in charge of nothing. I cannot even look after myself."

"Never mind. We are here to make you forget," said Jules.

The *patron* looked bewildered.

"But I can remember—everything."

"Yes—but not what you have forgotten. That is why we came back."

"But I have forgotten nothing."

"That is because you cannot remember it."

The *patron* gave it up.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I am the one who forgot," I told him, "but I remember now."

And I stared at the table where we had been sitting.

"What is the matter—what do you remember?" asked Jules. "You have the air of a very sick cow."

"I left my umbrella here," I said slowly. "And now it has gone."

"That," said the *patron*, "is not altogether surprising. Several people sat there since you left. The average citizen is fundamentally honest, but a man who has lost his own umbrella tends to become unscrupulous."

"It has gone now," I repeated.

"What are you worrying about?" asked Jules. "It was only an old one. I will buy you another. Better still—come with me and see if we can find one."

"Yes," I said slowly, "it was only an old one."

And then I shrugged.

"I am feeling miserable," I said. "We had better have another drink."

CHAPTER VIII

I

AND so we went to Italy.

Not that I had any desire to go. Indeed, were it not that I had lost the picture, I would soon have argued Jules out of that hare-brained scheme.

The fact that I had accepted the night before meant nothing. When one is looking through the bottom of a glass life seems far less complicated, but in the cold grey light of the morning I remembered that a *rapide* steers itself, whereas if you turn the wheel of a car too much, both you and the car go into the wall. And the faster you are going, the less you have to turn the wheel. It was not a comforting thought.

But what could I do? Now I had no picture. I had nothing to offer Jules. I could not atone for what I had done. The debt was still unpaid. And the gods do not like a man to leave this life with a burden of undischarged debts. An unpaid debt in one existence is a millstone in the next, and a man does not swim easily down the river of destiny if he has a stone around his neck.

The only way I could attempt to atone was by helping him. Once I had taken that decision, there was nothing more to be said.

"Not that I am under any illusions," said Jules with brutal frankness as we came to the low white inn outside Brescia. "I do not think that I will make you into a racing driver in three weeks——"

"Why not?" I interrupted.

He stared.

"But—that takes years——"

"No. Either a man has it in him, or else he has not. There is nothing to learn. Either it is there, or it is not there. The rest is practice."

"Yes—but years of practice."

"I am Hercule. I will only have weeks."

Though I spoke so confidently, I was only trying to cheer him up. I did not know how I would get on, but I am not the man to betray my doubts and fears to anyone but myself.

"But I do not expect you to do the impossible," protested Jules. "All I want is someone to drive while I rest. I can make up time when I am at the wheel. I asked you to do this because you are the only man I can trust. I could hire a mechanic—but how do I know he would not be one of those scoundrels in the pay of Perez? No—no. It is better thus—here we can be unobserved and practise without fear. I will enter under an assumed name and no one will know until we have won."

"But Perez is bound to recognise you."

"Not until the actual race—if we keep out of the way. That means he will have no time to plan. I do not think he will dare to try anything during the actual race—not after what happened last time."

"Maybe he won't. But Jou-Jou will."

"We must chance that. We can warn the police."

"That is what we did last time."

"What is the matter, Hercule—why are you so gloomy?"

"I am sorry—I do not know. Perhaps it is the thought of that evil Rat—he lies like a shadow on my life."

Jules was sympathetic. Ah—he was a good *type*, that one. He tried to cheer me up.

"Never mind—one day he will go too far."

"Yes," I agreed, "one day justice will step up beside him and take him by the arm."

Perhaps that was where I, Hercule, would come in, for all my life I have been seeking that blind lady, but without success. Perhaps one day I would find her, and then, instead of reviling her and cursing her, as so many men do, I would pity her and speak kindly to her and tell her how sorry I was that she could not see, and take her arm gently and place it in that of Jou-Jou.

Ah—it was a comforting thought, that one, and it pleased me immensely.

2

Now I will not weary you, M'sieu, with the details of how we practised and how Jules worked on that car night after night, fitting it with a hood and a windscreen and number-plates to conform to the regulations, while I was sleeping like a dead man, exhausted by my stupendous efforts during the day.

Some nights I did not sleep at all. That was when Jules dragged me out and made me drive in the dark to get used to the road, for this track was a main road sixteen hundred kilometres long—sixteen hours of continuous driving, from Brescia to Rome and back again from Rome to Brescia, crossing the Apennines twice, the second time in the dark.

It is enough to say that Jules was amazed. And that I was pleased. And if I, Hercule, am pleased with Hercule, let me tell you that means something, for I am not a man who is complacent.

Never had I realised that an automobile could go so fast. Never have I taken such risks. Never have I escaped breaking my neck so many times in such rapid succession.

But I did not care. I drove like a man inspired. To Jules I was a man who had accumulated a debt, and was trying desperately to pay, in the only way I understood.

And as I drove, faster and faster each day, I dared to hope that the gods, with such a lot to observe, would not fail to notice that one particular corner of the world, that stretch of highway between Brescia and Rome. And as the car, disguised with pieces of board and old sackings, roared and skidded round the corners, I dared not take my eyes from the white dusty road, but my heart seemed to look upward, and I liked to think that perhaps, even at that moment, they were reaching for the ink. . . .

One day was very much like another, until, in a very short time it seemed to me, we came to the day before the race. Jules had worked far into the night, but on that day he would allow neither of us to drive. We were to rest.

I was glad to rest. I felt deathly tired. We sat in the cool courtyard of the inn, which was also a farm, and I relaxed, it seemed for the first time, and let something of that peace about me steal into my blood, and flow there as if with the beat of my pulse.

It was a place of brightness and shadow, of sunshine and shade, in flaring and contrasting and alternating clarity. The sun blazed on the white road, and died beneath the dark-shadowed cypress trees. It glittered on the dry shining straw-scattered cobbles, but lost itself amidst the cool damp stones of the old roofed well. It steeped the wall with a blinding whiteness, and yet fled as if in despair from the tranquil velvet shade of the vines which hung clustering over the terrace.

There was peace and quietness all about us, and the long low farmhouse seemed to sleep in the benediction of the sun.

But Jules seemed to feel nothing of that tranquillity. He sat on the edge of the well and threw stones irritably at the cat.

Suddenly he looked up and met my eye. The cat spat at him and fled.

"I am sorry," he muttered apologetically, "but I am worried, Hercule."

"What about?"

"I have received no letter from Annette—I gave her the address. She should have written."

"Letters often get delayed," I told him, but even as I spoke I felt it was a foolish thing to say. But I had to say something. A Jules who was worried would not be of much use the following day. "My cousin once wrote me a letter which took a month to come from Switzerland."

"Did it now?" said Jules, visibly brightening. Ah—he was a simple soul, that one. He had the heart of a child.

"Yes—and do not forget that yours has got to come much further. They get held up at the frontiers sometimes. But I should not worry. There will be one tomorrow or the next day. What was the news in the town?"

"Not very much. Perez will be there—he is backing

two cars. But the police are watching everywhere, very strictly—I saw no sign of the others."

"That is good news," I said heartily, feeling that it would be a shame to worry him. Jou-Jou would not be likely to stand in the market-place to enable the citizens of Brescia to see that he had arrived. But I kept my fears to myself.

"I think we shall be left in peace this time," I continued cheerfully. "Let us go in and eat. After dinner I am going to sleep in the shade here. Then I am going to eat again. Then I shall go to bed."

"You are a very sensible man, Hercule," replied Jules. "All these things I shall do with you."

3

It was one o'clock on a Saturday in the *Viale Venezia* at Brescia.

I think I shall chiefly remember the start by the people—I have never seen so many confined in such a small space, nor heard so much noise. The soldiers—Bersaglier and Carabinieri—were there, as well as the police and the official guards. But behind them the great crowd seethed and moved and chattered and yelled, and occasionally, with hoots of excitement, some broke through and had to be bodily removed.

It was trying for the nerves, all this waiting, and I was glad as car after car came up to the starting line and our turn came at last. Jules was at the wheel. The engine throbbed and purred as the timekeeper pressed the catch of his chronograph and then suddenly roared and screamed as we shot away.

I noticed that Jules' gloved hands were steady on the wheel and I knew that he had forgotten his worries. Of

his face I could see little except helmet, goggles and white muffler.

In a matter of seconds we were out into the open country, and I tensed in the low bucket seat, hoping that the gods were watching me. I knew by the way that Jules drove that his brain had grown cold and clear, emptied of all thought and emotion. That was as it should be.

But I, Hercule, was risking my neck for the sake of my principles. It was not a comforting thought, when you considered the matter objectively.

And then I forgot my fears in admiration for Jules. *Tonnerre*—but he could drive a car, that one.

Through crowded villages we raced, down the straight tree-lined road at a fantastic speed, and always his eyes were intent on that flying ribbon of white which the low bonnet seemed to wind up beneath it, and always he held his head a little on one side, listening to the roar of the racing engine. To me it was just an engine, making a devil of a noise. But he had made it. He was like a father with his child. He would hear in a second if something were wrong, if each part were not functioning correctly.

Past the crowds of cheering people we went—past their white and blurred faces, melting and vanishing with incredible rapidity—past sun-bathed walls of stone which streamed along past my shoulder in a glaring white line—beneath the cool dark shadow of high cypress trees—through a medley of sound and shouting and cheering which deafened us.

And always above that noise beat the endless refrain of the roaring exhaust and the screaming supercharger, a continual and reverberating echo which boomed out again triumphantly, increasingly, as the town with its people flashed by and we were out once again in the open country.

I do not remember all their names now, but town after

town went by—Cremona, I think, and Piacenza and Modena, until we came to Bologna, where we nearly finished the existence of a couple of black-shirted troopers as they tried to keep the crowd away from the bonnet as it swayed dangerously near a sand-bagged corner.

The town was like an inferno, but soon we had left the dust and the heat and the noise ; and the stench of hot oil and the roaring and cheering and screaming all faded and died, and only the engine sang to us on a higher note as we began the climb up into the Apennines.

At first the rise was imperceptible, but soon the road became steep and climbed dangerously into the passes on the ridge. Several times I looked over the side and shut my eyes.

A great stone wall reared up beside Jules. Beside me there was nothing—only a great void. Far below I could see tiny trees and microscopic houses. I was on the top of the world. I, Hercule, was flying along nothingness, on the edge of a great hole, on the top of a precipice, with a metre of road and a screaming hot tyre and the skill of two gloved hands between me and disaster.

But here, I thought, here we are high up and therefore nearer to the house of *le bon Dieu*. Here the eyes of the gods will not have to strain so far to see me. Here they would know what I was doing, and why I was doing it. I closed my eyes again as Jules swept the bonnet round a hairpin bend and tried to imagine them up there turning the pages of the great book and calling for the ink.

Then the bonnet dipped and we swung down on the other side of the ridge and began the descent into Florence.

And so, covered with dust and splashed with oil, we came into Rome, where we checked in at the control. We had made the best time.

But I felt considerably older. And when I changed places with Jules I felt older still. He held out the road-book to be stamped, the number-plates were wiped, and with a roar from the ~~engine~~ we were off again.

"Now drive carefully," said Jules, "while I rest. But drive fast, as you have done before."

I assured him that I would do my best. And believe me, I did. I, Hercule, am not the man to shirk my responsibilities nor to evade my obligations, whether they be of this world or the next.

I, Hercule, crossed the Apennines in the dark, and our time for the second crossing was not very much more than for the first. Ah—that was a beautiful machine, the car that Jules had made. Driving it gave me an emotion similar to that when I gripped the regulator of one of Berliault's great locomotives. A piece of machinery, once it begins to move, is more than the metal parts of which it is composed. It has then a soul of its own, since movement is part of the rhythm of life. How can a thing which moves, then, be dead?

It was more than a racing-car. I felt as if I were guiding something that was alive—powerfully and frenziedly alive, and its eyes were the two headlamps that sent a golden swathe of light ahead, cutting the blackness with a warm and comforting glow.

I did not look over the side. I was barely conscious of the sheer wall of rock towering up above us as we climbed. I saw only the road ahead, soft and golden in the light I followed. I was no longer afraid, because I was occupied. I had no time to think. I had become a machine, calculating and estimating and judging distance and speed.

The whole world for me was contained in that swathe of light before me, and the road that unwound so swiftly into it, and all that fled by on either side—the ghostly majesty of marble pillars, the sombre black shadow of the giant cypress trees, and the high stone walls that caught

the roar of the engine and the crackle of the exhaust, and flung them back at me deafeningly, stridently.

I braked for a town, and we snaked through the narrow deserted streets and screamed around the corners and out again into the tranquil blackness of the open country. On one side, for an interminable distance, ran a high stone wall, the boundary of some estate.

And then I saw the cart. One moment there was only a golden road in front me, and the next there was this great cart piled high with baulks of wood. The horse seemed to have come up from the field and was heading diagonally towards the wall.

There was no one leading it. Head down, and tugging at the heavy load, the horse was obviously making its way to that side of the road to which it was accustomed.

There was not much time. In a second I had jammed on the brakes. And even as I put them on I realised that I could not stop in time, not at the speed at which I was going.

Ah, M'sieu—that was a time when Hercule had to think quickly. More than quickly. My mind worked like lightning.

The gap was closing. To hit the wall or the cart at that speed would be the end of everything, including Hercule. And I did not dare run off the road. Too often in that part of the world they were raised up on a causeway, higher than the level of the fields. We would probably overturn.

As I thought I acted. I took my foot off the brake and flattened the accelerator on the floor-board. The car seemed to leap forward and Jules started out of the uneasy doze which had claimed him.

There was just a chance that I could get through, and I took it.

And then several things seemed to happen, all at the same time.

I took the car as near the wall as I dared, praying that there were no overhanging stones—the horse flung up its head and reared high in the air as we shot by literally under its hooves—and from the cart came a stab of light, and something that glittered, for a fraction of a second, in the glow of the headlamps.

5

Jules had yelled as he woke up, and then he said something. I do not know what it was, because I did not hear him. Then, once we were through and the road was clear and straight I wondered why he did not speak.

I stole a glance at him. He had sunk down in the low seat, his head slumped forward on his chest. The stab of light had been a shot, and Jules had been hit.

He would have wished me to go on. I pressed the accelerator and the car surged forward at an even greater speed. And then, as I eased the wheel round for a bend, I felt the pain in my arm.

I drove on. I felt the wetness of my sleeve and knew that I was bleeding. With a sigh I slowed down, pulled in to the side, and stopped. A moment's delay here might save the race.

Quickly I felt Jules' heart. He was still alive. His helmet was split and a furrow ran across his brow, but it was not bleeding.

I tore off his muffler and bound it tightly around my arm, pulling the knot with my teeth. I could not see the knife which had gashed the flesh—it must have gone right across the car—but I knew by my wound that Jou-Jou had tried once again.

He had attempted to wreck the car with the farm cart, and when he saw that we were going to get through he had not hesitated.

I felt a fierce satisfaction that he had failed. Now all that remained was for me to win the race, and then I would let him in for another cursing from his employer, and repay my debt to Jules.

Thus filled with triumph I let in the clutch once again and roared on into the night.

But alas, M'sieu—for the tenacity of a man's high hopes. What chance has he against the gods who sit up above and plan and weave those tangled skeins which are our lives into a pattern which they alone know. Indeed, when I think of it, and how helpless we are, the wonder of it seems to me that man has the courage to dream at all. He is a pigmy in this giant world, but even the gods as they laugh must concede that at least he has courage.

From Perugia to Tolentino the great car roared on. I was driving like a man inspired.

But the ceaseless working of my muscles and the strain of turning the wheel worked the muffler loose, and I knew that it had started to bleed again.

There was no time to stop. Already I had given a minute—one whole minute of sixty seconds—from the time that Jules had so brilliantly snatched from the other cars by his superb driving. I did not know how much of that lead I had already lost by my driving, for I did not hope to make the same time as the veterans who were driving against me.

I could only keep on and try my utmost.

But I was weakening. I could feel that I was getting weaker and weaker.

Ah—it was a bitter thought, M'sieu—to sit there and feel the fierce and unbridled power of that splendid engine surging beneath me, and know that all the time my blood was dripping out and all the time I was getting more and more feeble, slower and slower in my reflex actions, and more and more clumsy in every movement I made.

We came to Ancona, and I sent the car flying along the straight level road by the shores of the Adriatic.

I tried to pray. Often I have found in this life when things go wrong it is comforting to offer a prayer to *le bon Dieu* and ask Him, since His strength is so much greater than mine, to take part of the burden. Often have I prayed thus while leaning out of the cab of my engine when I have been lonely and afraid.

Sometimes, for I am an ignorant man, a doubt used to come to me as to whom I was praying and if anyone heard my prayer. Perhaps I prayed to the wind and the arch of the sky, and the sunshine and the rain beating down on the earth, and the soft velvet blackness of the night—for these are all good things that sweep cleanly into a man's soul when he is alone, and lonely, and ashamed and afraid. I do not know. I only know that it pleased me to think that I, Hercule, was praying to *le bon Dieu* and perhaps that He, in His infinite goodness, would hear the humility of my prayer.

But now I could not pray.

Now I could only hold on to that wheel with a failing strength, while every thought, every emotion, every nerve in my being were all concentrated only into the task of keeping the car on that road.

I tried. Oh—believe me, M'sieu—I did try. There was my debt to pay—there was the atonement I had to make. It was so important that we should win. With every atom of strength in my body and brain I forced myself to go on.

Again I was tempted. This time I was tempted to close my eyes and sleep and give it all up, for I knew that I was too tired to go on. I was tired in every limb. My arms ached from the wheel, and my thighs from the unending pressing and lifting of the pedals. And I was weak. In my body was no strength.

But I would not give up. I forced myself to go on. Weak as I was, I fought that temptation and conquered it. I drove on.

But now the car was weaving from one side of the road to the other. The horror of what might happen rose up like a cold hand within me, with chill fingers clutching and constricting me, and I shivered.

But I would not give up. It would not have been his wish. And he was my friend. He trusted me.

I drove on, across the plains of Treviso. And then my arm went completely numb and I could not use it, neither could I feel it. And the wheel was getting heavier and heavier.

I came to a bend and tried to turn it. The wheel was too heavy. I tried to lift my foot to put the brake on. I did not have the strength.

The car left the road on the bend and hurtled into the field, in one great agonised plunge. The soft earth flew in clouds as it ploughed its way for several metres before it turned over slowly on its side.

The trumpet blew for the winner in the *Corsa Venezia*, but we did not hear it.

We were lucky. Or was it that the gods had laughed their fill and felt merciful ? I do not know.

I only know that the car did not turn completely over. The shock seemed to revive me for a moment. I was able to pull Jules out before the petrol flooded out on to the hot exhaust manifold and the wreck began to blaze.

Then I fainted.

And so, for the second time, I found myself in a hospital. But I did not stay long. They looked after me well, and gave me a blood transfusion, and in a few days I was out.

Jules came to see me on the second day. The bullet had only bruised the flesh beneath his helmet, jarring the bone. He had been unconscious for a long time, but now he was better.

He clasped my hand, and his honest face beamed with goodwill. I did not feel so cheerful. I was still weak.

"Are you all right, Hercule?"

"Yes."

"That is good."

"But your car—that is not good. I am sorry—oh, please believe me, Jules—I did my best—I swear I tried——"

He held up his hand.

"Now—now. The nurse says you are not to excite yourself, or else she will put me out. Let us take one thing at the time. The car is finished."

"I am sorry. It was my fault—all that work and time you spent——"

Again he interrupted me.

"Hercule—you are talking like a fool. You must be weak and in a fever. It was not your fault—it was the fault of that evil *apache*. You were right—he did try again."

"I will settle with him," I said. "The account grows longer, but it is still unpaid."

"Yes. I will leave that part to you. I have much work."

"What are you going to do?"

He stared at me.

"Do? Why—begin again, of course. I have shown them what that gear-box can do. Do you realise we made the fastest time ever recorded from Brescia to Rome? I am going to build another car—a better one."

I sighed. I wished that I had his enthusiasm. Ah—he was a man, that one. He would not stop. He was going to begin all over again. Success and disaster—he treated them just the same. His work went on.

Then he took my hand again.

"It is only through you, Hercule," he said, and his voice was tender as that of a woman. "It is only because of you that I shall be able to do this. You saved my car once from the flames. You nearly killed yourself driving for me——"

"But——"

"Do not interrupt. I know how you were wounded and they told me how you drove—and they told me how much blood you lost. And you saved my life—you pulled me out. No one ever had such a friend, Hercule—so loyal and so true."

He spoke with emotion. He was sincere. But I remembered what I had done and I turned my face to the pillow.

"You must go now," said the nurse. "He is still very weak."

7

Jules knocked. There was no answer. He took out his key and let himself in.

As I crossed the threshold I wondered why I had come—why I had not left him and gone straight to Paris as I had intended. But he had asked me. And because he was Jules I could not refuse. He had wished Annette to hear the whole story ; he had wanted her to see me before I left.

"Annette," he called.

There was no answer. He went upstairs. I waited for a long time. He did not come down. I went upstairs and found him sitting on the bed.

Trying to avert my gaze, I touched him on the shoulder. He looked up at me, and I saw the dumb misery in his eyes. Wordlessly he held a letter out to me.

I took it and read. It was not long.

She asked him to forgive her. She was going away with Perez, who could offer her everything that she had been missing in life. She had been happy with him once, but now there was only one thing in his life that mattered and that was his work. She was sorry. She asked him again to forgive her.

I looked down again at Jules. His eyes looked like those of a spaniel. I could have strangled her. And then I shook my head. What right had I to condemn her?

I took him by the arm and led him downstairs. He had taken it hardly, and I felt that if I was going to be of any use, I could speak more freely outside that bedroom.

I gave him a drink. He took it without seeing it but he looked better after a couple of glasses.

"She has left me, Hercule," he said.

"Yes. She was unhappy."

"How do you know?"

"She told me—one night when I was here."

"She did not tell me. I never dreamed—"

"It would have been of no use. She could not see what type of man you are. She could not understand your work. She could not wait. She wanted her happiness now."

"I did not know—I thought she understood."

"I tried to make her understand."

"Thank you—that was just like you, Hercule."

I took another drink. I felt that this was not leading us anywhere.

"Poor child," he sighed, "what happiness can she find with a man like that? He has only bought—how can he give? It will never last."

He looked at me defiantly.

"It will never last," he repeated.

"And then what?"

"She will come back—when he has tired of her."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

He was genuinely puzzled.

"What will you do?"

"Why—I will ask her forgiveness, because I could not keep her love—because I did not hold on to that happiness she gave me with both hands. I will ask her to tell me in what way I have failed her, since my love could not not keep her here. I must have failed her, since I let her go. And then I will try to do better, to be worthy of her."

"You must love her greatly."

"There is only one way to love, Hercule," he answered softly.

CHAPTER IX

I

THEN I went back to Paris.

And as I was walking from one station to the one near which I lived—for now I was a man without a picture, without a job and without prospects, and it behoved me to be careful even of omnibus fares—who should I see but Annette.

I had stopped at a cross-roads, and near me a large and luxurious automobile was waiting, its engine running smoothly and noiselessly, for the *gendarme* to lower his baton. In the back sat Annette, and beside her an individual I did not know. But with my lightning like rapidity of perception, it did not take me very long to deduce that this must be Perez himself.

Now I, Hercule, am a man of action. Other and lesser men, no doubt, would have stood gaping on the pave-

ment, reviling and cursing the fate that enabled one man to travel in comfort while another had to stagger with a bag on his weary feet. But that is not my way. With me, to think is to act.

In a second I had made up my mind. I stepped forward and wrenched open the door.

"A thousand pardons," I said with great civility to Perez, "but would you be kind enough to allow me a few words with Annette?"

He looked at me truculently. His face seemed nothing but jaw. I noticed that Annette had turned rather white, but she put a hand on his knee.

"Do you mind, dear? This is a very old friend of mine. I shall not be long."

"Very well. I will wait for you round the corner."

I drew back. She stepped out of the car, which almost immediately glided away.

We looked at each other.

"Thank you for permitting me to speak," I began. "When I have finished you will wish that you had driven on."

"Why?"

"Because what I have to say does not make a good story. Why did you tell Perez where we had gone?"

"But why not? He asked me and I told him. What was wrong in that?"

I sighed. She obviously knew nothing. To her Perez was a god, an inexhaustible fount of money, and therefore a god to be propitiated. I sighed again, at the futility of it all. What was the use of trying to convince her? It would take too long.

"There was an attempt to stop us in the race. Jules is not hurt but the car was wrecked. I came back with him. He read your note."

She closed her eyes.

"What did he say?"

"I will tell you in a moment—before you go. Why did you leave him, Annette?"

She looked at me, and there was something unfathomable in her dark eyes.

"We have gone over all that before, Hercule," she said quietly. "You know everything there is to know. I just could not stand it any longer. And then—when you had gone—it suddenly became even worse. When you had gone—I knew that already I had left him. When Perez came—I took another short step. I had already taken a long one—away from Jules."

"Forgive me, Annette."

She smiled at me. I realised that this was the first time I had ever seen her smile with her eyes as well as her mouth.

"Of course, Hercule—there is nothing to forgive. You gave me a little happiness—you held my hand for a moment, and because you were there the road seemed less lonely and I felt less afraid. If it had not been you—it would have been someone else. But I am glad it was you, Hercule—because you tried to help me so much—you were so loyal to Jules—"

"I think you had better go now, Annette."

"Tell me what Jules said."

"He said that he must have failed you. He blamed himself because you went. He said that when you came back—he knows you will come back—he will ask you to forgive him, and try to be worthy of your love."

"He said that?"

"Yes."

Then I said :

"Annette—do not throw away such love—it is too rare, and too precious."

She smiled again, but now there were tears in her eyes.

"Are you still giving me advice, Hercule? Ah no—I did not mean to hurt you. Yes—I will go back."

"When—now?"

"No—not now."

"Why?"

"I have given my word. I will go as soon as I can. Good-bye, Hercule."

"Good-bye."

I watched her go. Ah—she had courage, that one.

2

There was bitterness in my heart, M'sieu, as I walked on, heedless of where I was going.

My thoughts seemed to go round and round, and lead nowhere. I stopped at a *café* and bought myself a Pernod. I had exhausted myself trying to save an omnibus fare, but now I knew that I could not go on without a drink.

Ah, M'sieu—it does a man good to look right into his own soul, but what he sees there is seldom a comforting sight.

All our actions are like stones, cast into a wide and silent pool. The stone is soon gone, and forgotten, and the deep water closes up over it and engulfs it, and it is gone. But the ripples it makes—those spread right out, and they move over the surface, and they grow greater and greater and wider and wider, until perhaps on the far bank the rushes are swayed and stirred and pushed out of place as the ripples come to the shore. So it is with our actions. They are soon done, soon forgotten. But who will measure their effect? Who will dare to put a bound to the incalculable consequences of one deed? For everything in this world is cause and effect and effect and cause, multiplied and engendered a thousand times.

I was the one who was really responsible. If it had not

been for me she would probably still be at home. She had just told me so.

I called for another *absinthe*, and over the glass I said a prayer to *le papa Dieu*, that Perez might quickly tire of her and she might soon go back to Jules, and that his great love might endure, and they might find happiness together.

I felt a little better after I had said that, and I had another *absinthe*. And then I started thinking about the stone in the pool once again.

I did not like those thoughts I had just been having, I can tell you. I did not like them at all.

I thought again about the whole business. And then I banged on the table with my fist.

Jou-Jou the Rat. Of course. Fool that I had been not to have seen it before. He was the one responsible. It was all his fault.

It was through his persecution that we had had to run away, like two hunted dogs. Jules had told Perez we were going back to Avenches. If we had stayed there Annette would never have met him.

It was his fault, not mine.

Having reached this conclusion, I ordered another drink. I felt that I deserved one.

And then as I was pouring the water over the sugar, I suddenly stopped. Yes, but if I had not gone to Avenches, Jou-Jou would never have come there, since he followed me and the picture.

Ah, but by now I was in no mood for quibbling.

If that Rat had not stolen the picture in the first place, I told myself and the waiter and two or three harmless pedestrians, in a loud and arrogant voice, none of this would have happened. It was obviously all his fault. No-one contradicted me. Therefore I knew I was right.

The more I thought about it, as I sipped my last and

final drink, the more I saw how that evil *apache* was at the root of all the trouble which had come to these innocent people.

If I had hated him before now I hated him a thousand times more.

Even the waiter's blue jowl reminded me of his, hatefully. I gave him a large tip and told him to buy a razor, and walked out of the *café*.

3

It was not very long before I met Jou-Jou again.

I was sitting in the station *café* one night, enjoying a well-earned rest after a hard day's work—for *Madame La Compagnie* had had no hesitation in accepting the services of such a wheel-tapper as Hercule—when he came swaggering in and sat down at my table.

“*Salut, Hercule,*” he rasped.

I looked at him, and then looked quickly down at my glass, lest he read what was in my eyes.

“*Salut,*” I answered.

“What is the matter—you have the air of a constipated goat.”

My sensitive nature writhed beneath such crude comparisons, but as always, I rose to the occasion. There was some truth in his words. I must not betray myself. I controlled my emotions, swiftly and with a great effort.

“Why,” I answered cheerfully, “I was looking down at my glass to drink your health when I saw that it was empty.”

“And that made you sad?”

“Yes—that made me sad.”

“Well—there is no need to be sad any longer.”

And he called for a bottle of wine. I felt in my bones

that something was about to happen. Jou-Jou was not in the habit of buying me a drink because I happened to look sad.

I emptied my glass quickly, and re-filled it. Then I drank again. If he was willing to pay for one bottle, I argued, he would be willing to pay for two. I was right. He paid for two. He paid for three.

But I am going too fast.

When I had set my glass down I looked at him.

"Tell me, Jou-Jou," I said, "how and why it is that you should be thus buying me wine—when the last time we met——"

He roared with laughter.

"Aha—the last time we met—do you remember the *patron*?"

"Yes, I remember him."

"I made him believe I was a tax-inspector—oh-ho-ho-ho—that was funny."

For a while he laughed. Then he grew quiet and thoughtful.

"But I did not get much out of that affair. The cunning dog drained out that brandy which was to be my evidence, so I had to pay my bill—otherwise I would have lived there like a lord for nothing. The only thing I got was a few bottles of that wonderful brandy. Ah—that—that was cheap at the price."

I did not enlighten him. I had begun to breathe more freely. He had left Avenches when I pulled the car from the burning garage—he had not seen me at Le Mans—and as for the affair in Italy—I had just been a figure in goggles and a helmet.

I took another drink.

"Yes—but the last time we met——" I began again, and again he interrupted me.

"I know—I know. I thought you had a picture. Tee-hee—that was too funny."

"Why was it funny?"

"Because you did not have a picture."

"Why not?"

"Because you couldn't have had a picture."

"Why not?"

"Because someone has just been locked up for trying to sell that picture—here in Paris the day before yesterday."

"So all your suspicions were wrong—and you followed me there for nothing?"

"Yes—tee-hee—don't you think it is funny?"

I looked at him, but in his beady black eyes I saw the dancing flames that were consuming a man's dreams, and behind the flames I saw the hot glowing wreckage of a man's ambitions, and behind the flames and the ash I saw the greedy insensate glittering avarice that would wreak misery and sorrow and suffering for the sake of a few hundred francs.

"No," I said shortly, "I do not think it so very funny."

He leered at me and emptied his glass.

"Ah—but I do. You see, my trip there was not altogether wasted. I saw my friend Lupin, and he gave me a little job. It was not much, admittedly—but it was a job. And then I had to go to Italy, still on the same job. I thought Italy was a fine country."

"And you finished your job?"

"Yes—oh yes. I was paid for it, too. But also I was insulted."

"What did you do with his body?"

Jou-Jou laughed. That was the kind of joke which appealed to him. He was so pleased that he bought another bottle.

"No—I did nothing. He was clever, that one. He

insulted me when half-a-dozen of his men were standing by. He said I was a bungler. He dared to call me—Jou-Jou—a bungler. But I will have my revenge. That is why I have come to you."

I looked at him.

" You need my help ? "

" Yes."

" And you are prepared to pay me for that help ? "

" Certainly."

" Then in that case it is my turn to buy the next bottle."

He did not argue. I had not expected that he would, but I, Hercule, have my pride.

" Tell me what I am to do, then," I said when we had drunk, " and for the money you are going to pay me, I will do it."

" Good. Now listen carefully. I have a plan. It is a good plan. It is a splendid plan. All my plans are splendid, that is why I am rich. You have heard of Perez the millionaire ? "

I looked thoughtfully at my glass.

" Yes," I answered, " I have heard of him."

" Well, the latest Madame Perez——"

" What do you mean, the latest ? "

He glared at me.

" I mean what I say, *imbécile*," he retorted. " They all call themselves Madame Perez—it saves much trouble and fuss, and there is never more than one at the time, so they don't get mixed up——"

" All right," I told him. " All right. What about her ? "

" You would know by now if you did not keep on interrupting," he growled. " Now listen. And be quiet. This Madame Perez is travelling tomorrow to the South. Perez has just bought her a necklace of diamonds. She

will wear it. It is worth thousands—tens of thousands—hundreds of thousands——”

“ Probably thousands of thousands,” I put in, “ since Perez, they say, owns most of South America. And how do you know all this ? ”

Jou-Jou stroked his blue chin.

“ I am one of those who work for my living,” he answered with an air of great satisfaction.

“ She will not travel alone, though,” I said. “ She is too rich. Rich people do not travel alone.”

“ No—she will have for company a secretary and her maid. Perez is already on the coast—he flew there yesterday. She goes to join him. She tried to reserve a compartment, but at this time of the year it was impossible. Not even her money could get a whole compartment. In it there were two seats already reserved. One belongs to me, and the other to Gaston.”

“ Who is Gaston ? ” I asked.

“ Who do you think, *imbécile*—a detective from the Sûreté,” he replied.

Of a truth, he was a sarcastic one, that Jou-Jou.

“ Gaston is my accomplice. You are my second accomplice——”

“ Therefore we share the necklace into three parts,” I put in swiftly, “ and I shall be a rich man.”

“ Oh no—we do nothing of the kind,” he said, and as he spoke his hand seemed to stray towards his hip-pocket. I knew what he kept in there, and so I said nothing.

“ It is my plan,” he went on. “ I thought of it. I conceived it. I elaborated it, spending much time and trouble to bring it to perfection. And then I brought it forth. Mine was the *accouchement*. Mine was the labour. You are only helping me. You are, so to speak, nothing more than a midwife. I will pay you fifty francs——”

I reached for my cap.

"Where are you going, friend Hercule?" he asked softly.

"To get in touch with Madame Perez' secretary," I should have answered, but alas, M'sieu, his knife was already half-way out, and so I sat down again.

"Agreed," said I.

After all, fifty francs is fifty francs, when one is only a poor wheel-tapper and no longer carrying about a priceless picture rolled up in an umbrella.

4

"But I do not know the plan," I continued. "What will happen?"

"This," he replied. "Gaston will make a snatch at the necklace, just before we stop at Dijon to change engines. He will produce a revolver and threaten to shoot. I shall make one heroic leap, knock it from his hand and stun him——"

"How much does Gaston get?" I asked.

"Do not interrupt. Gaston gets one hundred francs, because his is the hardest task. Also the most painful. As he falls he flings the necklace out of the window. I snatch the revolver, re-assure the ladies and the secretary, bow gallantly, and call to a wheel-tapper who is passing by to hand up the necklace to me."

"And so I hand the necklace up to you," I said thoughtfully.

"Yes—to me."

Jou-Jou's beady eyes glittered like those of a snake, and once again his hand began to move.

"Yes—yes," I agreed hurriedly. "I hand the necklace to you. Certainly."

Jou-Jou nodded, and took a great gulp from his glass.

"Well," said I, "that is not much of a plan. It costs you one hundred and fifty francs, and all you will get is the lady's thanks——"

Jou-Jou put his other hand into his front pocket, and pulled out a magnificent necklace, which glittered and flashed and glowed like a living thing in the strong light.

I gasped.

"Oh—but you have it already," I said, "what is all the plan for, then?"

Jou-Jou called for another drink, and made a very rude and sarcastic remark concerning my intelligence. As he paid for the drink I could say nothing.

"I thought it would be clear even to a child," he went on. "This is an imitation—and a very good one, too. It cost me a good deal of money. Here—take it. Do not wave it about. Put it away and hide it. That is what you will hand back to me tomorrow."

5

Ah—he was a cunning one, that Rat. He would get the necklace as well as Annette's thanks, and probably a reward from the secretary, who would not have enjoyed reporting its loss to Perez.

The next day I told them that I did not feel well, and made my way to Dijon by the fast goods which went before the *rapide*. I was in my working-clothes and had my hammer with me, so that my presence along the line at Dijon would arouse no suspicion.

As I sat in that uncomfortable truck I thought furiously as to how I could frustrate his wicked plan, but long before I reached Dijon I gave it up. I could see no opening, no loophole of escape, no way of wrecking his plan without endangering my own life.

It was a good plan, and it ran on oiled wheels. Everything happened as Jou-Jou had foretold.

I was waiting where the carriage would stop. Jou-Jou had told me which compartment to watch. As the train slowed down I heard a shriek. That would be the maid, I thought. Annette would not shriek. I heard an oath. That would be Gaston with his revolver. I heard the sound of a blow and a fall. That would be Jou-Jou, enabling Gaston to earn his hundred francs, I reasoned as I waited there on the up-line.

Then I saw something glittering fall from the window to my feet. And that is the necklace, I said to myself, as I ran forward to pick it up.

Then temptation descended upon me, swift and sudden and fierce. Ah—how rich I could have been if I had yielded to it. How easy it would have been to run away as fast as I could, to hide the necklace and swear that I had never seen it.

But then would Jou-Jou believe me? Of course not. I would have to endure the same persecution all over again—this time not because of a picture but because of a necklace.

And by now I was getting used to these temptations. The more one fights, the more one learns how to fight. I had no mercy on that temptation. I took it and crushed it and trampled it beneath my feet.

Then I decided to climb up on to the footboard and see this drama for myself.

There they were, just as Jou-Jou had pictured it. Gaston lay insensible on the floor. The secretary was wiping his brow. The maid was almost fainting. Jou-Jou looked splendidly heroic, freshly shaved, with a revolver in his hand.

And Annette—ah, M'sieu—if only you had seen her. She was not frightened. With all her faults, she had

courage, that one. I could see it in her eyes as she stood there, facing them all. To me she was even more beautiful than before. And I had always known she was beautiful.

I was moved. I spat with profound emotion. Unfortunately, I forgot where I was, and some of it entered the carriage. But I did not care.

She was lovely. How I envied that Rat. How I longed to be in his shoes. I, not Jou-Jou, should have saved her—I, Hercule, with my romantic and chivalrous nature. Once before I had tried to help her, because she was so beautiful and so unhappy. And now the memory of all that lay behind me, like some wistfully-remembered dream, and I longed for the chance to help her again—to do something for her—to make her way along the road of life a little easier, perhaps a little happier, and to accept nothing from her in return. I only wanted to give. I wanted to show how much I admired her courage, since it is a thing so few people have, and of all virtues the most estimable.

I felt that I wanted to atone, since if it had not been for me, none of this would have been happening.

And then in the midst of my beautiful thoughts, there came the voice of Jou-Jou, and before my eyes, rapt in the contemplation of her courage and her dignity, there came the infuriated and unlovely features of Jou-Jou, blue-jowled in spite of his recent shave, at the window.

"Name of a name of a name," he hissed, and the ferocity in his voice was unbelievable. "Is this, then, a picture-gallery?"

And then in a majestic tone he continued :

"Where is that necklace which was flung out of the window? Give it back or I call the guard."

What a shock to my exquisite thoughts his rude and rough voice gave. Mechanically I handed it to him, and

watched him bowing like an ape. At that moment I was as if in a dream.

Annette took no notice of me. To her, I was only a dirty wheel-tapper—I doubt if she even recognised me. She had eyes only for Jou-Jou and her necklace. Knowing her pride, I can well imagine her relief. To have to confess to Perez that her necklace had been stolen—ah, no—she would not have relished that task, not even with all her courage.

6

Jou-Jou continued to bow and to contort his scowling features into what he imagined must be a pleasant smile, but which to me resembled an ingratiating leer.

Then he stooped and hoisted the insensible body of Gaston to his shoulder and banged and pushed his way out of the narrow door. My sympathies at that time were with Gaston. If ever a man earnt his money, that man was Gaston.

I dropped down again on to the line. I knew what would happen next. Jou-Jou had assured them that he would take the perpetrator of this diabolical outrage to the police. He was on his way now. But I knew that when they arrived at the next coach, the insensible body would no longer be insensible. Together they would open a door and drop down quickly on to the line. Jou-Jou would not wish me to be alone too long, that I knew.

And I did not have very long to wait.

In a moment they were standing beside me, and Jou-Jou held out his hand.

I gave him the necklace. He looked at it. I thought he was about to have a fit.

“Fool,” said Jou-Jou. “Idiot. Ape. Lunatic. Pig. Son of a pig. Species of tripe—of offal—of dung—”

This and much more he said, speaking in a very quiet and very rapid voice, and not once taking his eyes from the necklace I was holding out in my hand.

"What, then, is the matter?" I asked him when he paused for breath. No—perhaps he did not pause for breath. I think he stopped because he did not know any more words.

"It is the wrong necklace."

"What?"

"You handed up the real one, you *crapule*," he hissed.

I looked at what I held in my hand. He was quite right. I sighed. I had been flustered and excited, it is true, and pre-occupied with my thoughts, but nevertheless I felt very guilty. I make no excuses. What a calamity. All that beautiful plan had come to nothing, because of my mistake.

"I am sorry," I said meekly. "It was an accident. It might have happened——"

"Bah," interrupted Jou-Jou. "Give me that," and he snatched it out of my hand. "Truly, you are insupportable."

And he walked off in a vile temper.

"What about my fifty francs—and my fare to Dijon and back?" I bawled out after him.

His reply was unprintable.

CHAPTER X

I

I DID not see Jou-Jou again until the New Year.

It is not money which makes a happy New Year—although I would be the last to deny that it helps—but good will, and kindness, and the company of friends.

Behold us then, Robert and I, sitting beside the fire

on that New Year's Eve, many years ago, with three good bottles of wine on the table before us.

Robert was married, but his wife had taken the children to her family in the country. The fact that he had spent Christmas with them may have had something to do with his decision to remain. I do not know. I only know that he knew I was alone, and I was thankful that he stayed with me. He was *un chic type*, that Robert.

We were happy. We had finished with work for two days. We had accepted with dignity and restraint, as befits men of pride, the miserable bonus which *Madame La Compagnie* had seen fit to add to our inadequate salaries.

My home may have been humble, but there was plenty of coal. A coal wagon had become derailed just outside the station the week before, and unless passengers are involved, it always takes time for the travelling crane to arrive. I had blisters on my hands, but plenty of coal.

The room may have boasted of only two chairs, but at least they were comfortable. The chicken may have been tough, since Robert had won it in a raffle some considerable time ago, but it was our own, and hunger makes a fine sauce.

I repeat, M'sieu—we may have been poor, but at least we were together, and we were happy.

We were attacking that chicken with a hearty appetite, when suddenly there came a thunderous knocking at the door, accompanied by the tinkling clash of glass as the last pane fell out. It was not surprising. The house had been condemned a long time ago, but nothing had been done since. It was not surprising that the glass fell out. What surprised me was that anyone should wish to knock so hard.

I went to open the door.

Into the house came Jou-Jou the Rat, with Michel who was his chief lieutenant. Between them they were

supporting Gaston, who was deathly pale, and whose leg trailed awkwardly behind him as he limped across the threshold.

I took them into the room. Robert stared open-mouthed, a leg of the chicken still held in his hand.

"*Salut, Hercule,*" cried Jou-Jou, and his rasping voice had a cheerful note, as if he were well pleased with life, "A happy New year, Robert."

"A happy New Year to you," replied poor Robert civilly but doubtfully. Jou-Jou is hardly the man a respectable citizen would choose for a New Year's companion.

I was even more distressed, for if Jou-Jou's habitual scowl was bad enough, Jou-Jou in a jovial mood was a terrible thing. In this mood he made me feel like a mouse, helpless between the paws of a large and vicious cat. With that lightning perception which has always stood me in such good stead, I realised in a flash what their presence meant. Evil had come into my house, and on New Year's Eve. It was a terrible thought.

But Jou-Jou took no notice of our lack of enthusiasm. With Michel's aid he lowered Gaston into my chair, and proceeded to draw from his capacious coat-pockets three bottles of brandy. Michel produced three of wine. They took off their hats and coats, hung them up on the nail in the hall, and returned to the room.

Jou-Jou took one of his bottles of wine and smashed the neck against the fender. Then he poured a liberal quantity over his boots. Then he poured some over my boots and Robert's boots. Then he poured some more over the boots of Michel. Then he went to where Gaston was sprawling in the chair and emptied the remainder of the bottle over his boots too. Then he calmly smashed the bottle to pieces and kicked the broken glass towards the fireplace.

Then he sat on the table. Michel stood by the fire. Gaston was sagging in the chair. Robert began to gnaw abstractedly at the chicken's leg, for he was hungry.

2

"There is no need to look so sad," said Jou-Jou, as he opened a second bottle of wine. "This is a New Year's party, friend Hercule, to which you were kind enough to invite four of your old friends."

"I did not know I possessed so many," I told him.

"Oh yes you do. Such old and valued friends, in fact, that you determined to spend New Year's Eve in their company. Is that not right, Michel?"

Michel drained his glass.

"Quite right," he said shortly. "We all met together at five o'clock, as soon as you had finished work, and we came straight along here."

Jou-Jou lifted the bottle in one sinewy hand, and looked at me with his piercing beady eyes.

"You hear that, friend Hercule?" he said softly. "And you, Robert—you are sure you heard that?"

"Yes. We heard you," mumbled Robert with his mouth full.

"That is good. That is very good indeed. I would not forget it, if I were you. Now drink up—and let us have a good party."

We ate. We drank. We smoked. But Gaston did none of these things. His head had fallen forward on his arms, and he seemed to be asleep.

I was devoured with curiosity to know what it all meant, and so, after the bottles had circulated, and Jou-Jou and Michel appeared more at ease, I asked them.

"You will pardon my curiosity," I said, "but would you tell us what it all means?"

Jou-Jou looked at me with triumph in his eyes.

"Well—I don't see why not, considering that it is all because of you and the unforgiveable hash you made of a perfectly simple matter. I told you I was going to get that necklace. Well—I have got it."

"The necklace of Madame Perez?"

"Yes—the one you solemnly gave back to her. But you will not be permitted to do such a thing again—oh no."

And he patted his jacket pocket.

"I will keep it here safely, until I am far away from you, friend Hercule. I do not trust you. I do not for a moment think that you have any evil intent. It is just that things have an unaccountable habit of going wrong wherever you are."

"That," I pointed out, "is hardly my fault. But you still have not told me what it all means."

"It means, friend Hercule—that in spite of that old fool Inspector Pinaud and his cordon of police at the Cathedral—we have got it."

"But how?"

Michel made a movement as though to restrain his chief, but Jou-Jou had finished a bottle by himself, and had now started on the brandy, and he took no notice.

"She wanted to wear it for the evening service, and Perez, in view of what happened before, telephoned to the police for protection. He was quite right—that necklace is worth a fortune—"

"It is worth more than a fortune," I whispered to myself, "because he gave it to her. It is worth a man's dreams and his honour and his happiness—ah, it is an evil thing to be worth so much. She said she would go back—*cher Dieu*, let her go back soon."

But I was glad she had gone to the evening service. I was glad that she had gone to pray before the candles on

the high altar. Perhaps the tranquillity of their soft waxen light would ease the torment that must be in her heart. Perhaps *le papa Dieu* would comfort her and give her peace, she who had suffered so much, she who had not known what to do, she who had taken the wrong decision and yet had the courage to abide by what she had done—she who was not afraid to push her boat out alone on such a wide and merciless sea. Perhaps as she knelt there in the shadowed gloom of the high cathedral her brave heart would find the peace and understanding it deserved.

Jou-Jou was patting his pocket and roaring with laughter.

“And they sent old Pinaud—tee-hee—what can he do?”

“They say he is the greatest detective in France,” put in Michel.

“What of it? I am the greatest criminal in France,” retorted Jou-Jou.

3

Robert and I looked at each other with an increasing apprehension. So this was why Jou-Jou had spent the evening with us. A cold sweat broke out on my brow. Perjury is no laughing matter.

“What is the matter, friend Hercule?” asked Jou-Jou jovially. “It cannot be that you have forgotten your kind invitation already?”

And his hand went round, quite casually, to his hip-pocket. I sighed. I knew what he kept there.

I shook my head. Jou-Jou’s knife was better in his pocket than sticking out of my belly.

“Oh no—I have not forgotten,” I replied..

“That is just as well. Because old Pinaud has an

obsession in his head, and that obsession happens to be me. By now he will be searching all the cellars in Montmartre. But he need not search for long, because I have left word everywhere how to find me."

" You told them—that you were here ? "

" Naturally. It is not often that you invite me, friend Hercule. It was such an unexpected pleasure that I told everyone."

" So Inspector Pinaud will soon be here—here in this house ? "

" No doubt. Have another drink, friend Hercule—you are looking pale."

I drank, but with little heart, I can assure you. But even in my misery, my brain was not idle.

Robert, poor fellow—what with the wine he had drunk and the consciousness of the perjury he would soon have to commit—was stupefied. He put down the leg of the chicken and seized hold of the carcase, almost fiercely, as if it were the one thing of which he could be sure. Raising it to his mouth with an abstracted air, he began tearing at that portion which lay between the legs. There was grease on his chin and anguish in his eyes.

I took one look at him, and realised that he would be of little help.

Michel came to the table.

" Have you thought about Gaston here ? " he asked. " Pinaud must have seen him stagger when he fired. If he sees him like this the game is up."

" Quite right, Michel—that shot was unlucky. I did not count on that when I arranged for Pinaud to come here."

Jou-Jou stroked his blue jowl reflectively.

" I have it," he said suddenly. Taking the bottle of brandy, he swiftly poured a liberal quantity over the unfortunate man's head.

"There—that will make him reek enough," he said.
"We can push him under the table and pretend that the party has been too much for him."

Michel took a glass and filled it from the same bottle.

"That is a good idea. Here—give him a glass as well. Pinaud is a wise old bird—he may smell his breath."

"No—no," I said, starting forward. "You are mad. If he is wounded, that brandy will bring on a fever. He will smell enough as it is with all that on his head. Wait—I will get him some water."

Gaston raised his head.

"Yes—water," he croaked.

"Perhaps it would be better," Jou-Jou agreed.

I went quickly into the kitchen. My active brain had thought of a plan. I saw that Gaston was the weak link in their chain. Once Inspector Pinaud saw his limp the game was up. And that would be the end of Jou-Jou, for a long time.

The only problem was to know what to put in the glass. I knew Gaston was too ill to protest. He would drink whatever I gave him. I had to make him get up. I had to make him walk.

I knew there was a bottle of castor-oil somewhere on the shelf. But it took me some time to find it amongst the great and varied collection of empty bottles that shelf contained.

At last I saw it. I reached up, took it down, and tipped half of what was left into a glass. Then I filled the glass up with water. It did not mix very well, but I knew it would be seen through a haze of wine and brandy.

As I came into the room there was a knock at the door. I held out the glass.

Jou-Jou took it and held it out again to me.

"I do not like a man who takes so long to get a glass of water, friend Hercule," he said, "especially when it

is from his own kitchen—I do not like it at all. You had better drink it yourself, friend Hercule."

"Oh no," I replied, "not on top of all that—"

"Drink it," hissed Jou-Jou, whipping out his knife, "or else I will slit your belly and pull out your entrails and tie them in knots before putting them back."

The knocking on the door was repeated, louder this time.

I took the glass and drank. I was in no state to argue. Jou-Jou's horrible threat had made me feel quite ill.

"Now go and open the door."

In a moment Jou-Jou had forced Gaston under the table, pushed Robert out of his chair, sat down, and put his feet on the supine body. Michel sat in my chair at the other end of the table and did the same.

I opened the door and admitted Inspector Pinaud.

4

He was old, and in his hand he carried a badly furled umbrella. His waistcoat met with difficulty across his belly, and its lower half was plentifully stained with egg and cigarette ash.

Yet his eyes were shrewd. As I looked into his eyes I realised that he could quite easily be the greatest detective in France. And he was here, in my home.

As I looked into his eyes I felt that my inside was turning to water. Here was a man who would show no mercy. And then I remembered what I had drunk, and I realised that perhaps it had nothing to do with his eyes at all. I felt very uncomfortable, but I did not dare to move.

"They told me you were here, Jou-Jou," he said as he came into the room. I caught a glimpse of two *gendarmes* in the hall outside before I closed the door.

"Why—if it isn't Inspector Pinaud. A happy New Year to you, Inspector. Come inside. Have a drink."

Jou-Jou was very jovial indeed.

"No, thank you. So you have been here all the evening, Jou-Jou?"

The Inspector was as polite as Jou-Jou was cheerful. He stood with an elbow on the mantelpiece, and from the cigarette which he kept in his mouth the ash dropped continually on to the protuberance which his waistcoat contained.

"Of course—this is Hercule's New Year's party, is it not, Hercule? This is my friend Hercule, Inspector—and this is his friend Robert. They both work at the station—you can check up on them."

Jou-Jou twisted round in his chair and looked at me. Michel gripped a bottle by its neck.

"Of course it is," I hastened to say. "Is there anything strange in having a party for one's friends on New Year's Eve?"

"No—I suppose not," replied the Inspector slowly. "But I should be more careful of the company you keep, M'sieu Hercule."

Michel shifted his grip and filled a glass.

"Do not take any notice of him, Hercule," said Jou-Jou. "He has an obsession."

"Maybe," replied the Inspector. "And what has happened to your friend here?"

Jou-Jou laughed.

"Hercule's wine is very good, Inspector—you ought to try a glass. Gaston found it very good indeed—poor fellow."

The figure beneath the table stirred. Jou-Jou's feet moved as well, but the bland expression on his face did not change.

"Come on, Inspector," he continued, "let me pour you a glass."

The Inspector lit another cigarette.

"Very well—if you insist."

By now I was feeling more than uncomfortable. I began to move towards the door, before it was too late.

"Where are you going?"

Inspector Pinaud had not moved, but his voice made me jump. His eyes were shrewd and merciless.

"I—I do not feel well—the wine—" I stammered.

"Well, stay here and feel unwell in here," he snapped.

Jou-Jou filled a glass. The figure beneath the table moved again. Some of the wine spilt on the newspaper as Jou-Jou kicked him, surreptitiously but savagely.

Inspector Pinaud left the mantelpiece. He lifted up one end of the newspaper and looked at Gaston's head. He took the cigarette from his mouth, bent down closer, and sniffed. Then he straightened and dropped the newspaper.

He took the glass with him and walked back to the fireplace.

"You are quite sure you have not been out this evening, Jou-Jou—say about eight o'clock?"

"I—why should I go out—in the middle of a party? Hercule's fire is much too snug, and Hercule's wine is far too good. Oh, no, Inspector—we have been here with Hercule ever since he finished work."

I made a great effort to think about something other than the one thing that was troubling me.

"That's right—about five o'clock," I said, for Jou-Jou's hand had gone, carelessly, to his pocket.

"And Robert too?"

Robert looked at what he had been chewing, an expression of frozen horror on his face. I believe he saw

it for the first time. He put the carcase down on the table and began to wipe his mouth.

"Yes—we stopped work together," he mumbled.

The wine and the chicken and the castor-oil were all turning over and over inside my belly. At least, that is what it felt like, and I waited with apprehension for the ultimate outcome of that diabolical internal conflict.

Jou-Jou put his feet negligently on the table. He was perfectly composed.

"Why are you asking all these questions, Inspector?" he asked coolly. "Has something gone wrong?"

The Inspector's eyes narrowed. He turned and put his glass carefully on the mantelpiece. When he faced Jou-Jou once more he held a revolver in his hand.

Jou-Jou calmly poured himself out another glass of wine.

"What is the matter, Inspector?"

"Not very much, Jou-Jou," he replied. "Only that when Hercule stopped work at five o'clock the streets were dry. At seven it began to snow. At eight o'clock—at the time when three men left Notre Dame in a very great hurry—the streets were covered with snow. And your boots, Jou-Jou—they seem very wet for a man who has been at a party since five o'clock."

Jou-Jou laughed. Ah—he had a nerve, that one. He laughed so loudly and so confidently that I could see the Inspector's assurance was shaken. But I did not take very much interest. I had something else to think about. I wished they would be quick, or else it would be too late.

"Ah—that is nothing, Inspector," said Jou-Jou cheerfully when he had finished laughing. "If you take the trouble to look at Hercule's boots and Robert's boots and Michel's boots and Gaston's boots—if you look at all the boots in the room you will see that they are all wet. And yet none of us have been out of the room."

"What do you mean?" asked the Inspector. I could see that he was puzzled. But I took little interest. I stood there awkwardly, resigned to my fate. For by now it was too late. The inevitable had happened.

"I mean that they are all wet with wine. We have all been dancing around a bottle—it is an old custom in the *Pays Bas* where I come from. You can see the pieces in the fireplace—Hercule did not dance too well. You can come and smell our boots, if you like."

Again Inspector Pinaud took the cigarette from his mouth, and again he sniffed. I was glad that he was over by the table and not near me.

Then he pocketed his revolver and went out. I personally did not care whether he went or stayed. I was miserable. It is not thus that a man should celebrate the New Year.

CHAPTER XI

I

I HAD tried, and again I had failed. Jou-Jou had frustrated me, in a particularly brutal and degrading manner.

Yet even in my misery, I could not help feeling a secret satisfaction that I, Hercule, had been able to conceive such a masterly plan in the midst of such mental turmoil. If only the bottle had been handy, and Jou-Jou had suspected nothing—in the midst of his polite protestations to Pinaud, Gaston, unable to contain the agony any longer, would have burst from beneath the table despite all their kicks and blows, and limped across the room to assuage his torment.

A thing which I, also, had been unable to do. I could

only stand and suffer. But it had been a good plan. I was proud of it. Once Gaston had stood up and limped the game would have ended, with Jou-Jou the loser.

But I had failed. Jou-Jou's account was still unsettled. Doubtless the gods knew why. But it worried me. I am a practical man. If it were left unpaid much longer, it would take on the appearance of a bad debt. It was clear to me that I must begin all over again. I did not waste time in idle recriminations. That is not my way. Who am I to argue with the inscrutable wisdom of the gods in the high places?

But it was not until after Michel had left this world—a little dirtier and more evil than when he entered it—that my chance came. Michel had had a charmed life. But when the gods give you nine lives, it is foolish to expect a tenth. There must be limits, even to the patience of omnipotence.

Now the curious part of it all is that although I would willingly have assisted anyone to rid the world of Michel—since he served no good purpose and caused untold suffering—yet unwittingly, because of my conscience, I did the best I could to save him.

Perhaps that is why I have been able to forget the whole affair and sleep soundly at night—a thing I thought I would never be able to do again when I saw it happen. My conscience is clear. I honestly tried to warn Jou-Jou. I knew what would happen. I know something about cause and effect—I foresaw it all. I am a man of intelligence, and unlike most people, I use what brains *le bon Dieu* has seen fit to give me.

But Jou-Jou was obstinate. He always was obstinate. I like to think that perhaps now he is not quite so obstinate. Tee-hee—it is a comforting thought, that one.

One morning, early in the New Year, I had finished tapping the wheels of the *rapide*, and had climbed up on to the platform, when who should I see approaching but Jou-Jou himself, conspicuously resplendent in a revolting purple suit.

I turned the other way, for quite apart from the disturbing effect of that sartorial atrocity on a man of delicate and sensitive susceptibilities, I thought it better to have as little to do with such a man as possible. At least, until I was ready. As yet I was not. I had no plan. But I was too late. He had seen me.

"Do not run away, friend Hercule," he began softly. "Do not run away, lest you trip over your hammer and injure yourself."

"What do you want?" I asked him shortly.

"I want to talk to you, friend Hercule."

But before he began he turned to the other side of the platform and watched the local train which always steamed out a few minutes before the *rapide* was due to start.

Jou-Jou seemed unduly interested in that local train. He stared at it thoughtfully, and then looked at his watch. Then he nodded as though satisfied, and took me by the arm.

"Come, friend Hercule," he said, leading me down the platform, away from the men who were working on the suburban line. "Come with me, and I will tell you something very interesting. Something which no-one else must know, friend Hercule—you understand?"

And his hand went round to his hip-pocket, as though he were feeling for a cigarette case. But I knew what he kept in the hip-pocket. And he knew that I knew.

And I knew that he knew that I knew. And it was not a cigarette case.

"I understand," I replied quickly. "But why pick on me? You need not tell me. I wish to have nothing to do with it—whatever it is."

Jou-Jou laughed.

"That is just what I wish to make sure, friend Hercule. That is just why I am going to tell you all about it. You have a habit of poking your ugly nose into my affairs—that is why I am warning you now. Listen.

"Next Monday a certain foreign gentleman will be taking this *rapide* to the coast, on his way to England. With him he will have a wooden case—a plain wooden box, friend Hercule, without handles and without cord, but stoutly made and secured with several locks. That box is full of jewels. He has come to Paris to try to sell them. He thinks he may obtain a better offer, so he is taking them to London."

Jou-Jou smiled at me evilly.

"At least—that is what he thinks."

"But surely he does not carry a box full of jewels about without a guard?" I said.

"Oh no—there will certainly be a guard. There will probably be several guards. But that does not matter. Do not worry, friend Hercule—you do not have to worry at all. You are not stealing the jewels, friend Hercule—that is what I am trying to make you understand."

Ah—he was an evil one, that *apache*—sly and cunning and full of suspicion.

"This foreign gentleman," he continued, "will be delayed in the traffic on his way to the station. He will hasten along this platform to catch the *rapide*. Behind him, or before him, whichever he prefers, two porters will be wheeling his wooden box on a trolley. With him will run his escort, his *gendarmes*, his guards from the

hotel and his Embassy—in fact, everyone who wishes will run along with him.

"But that will not matter. Let them run. The point is that he will arrive on this platform just as the local train steams out."

"I do not see—" I began.

"Have patience—and I will explain. I will be one of the porters running along with the trolley, friend Hercule," replied Jou-Jou softly. "And Michel will be in that local train—in a compartment by himself. And as we draw opposite, he will throw out a steel wire—flexible but very strong, for the box is heavy. On the end of this wire will be a fine steel hook, whose end, sharpened like a razor, will go into the wood like a knife into butter."

"When did you say all this is happening?" I asked.

"Next Monday."

"Well, in that case you had better have a rope instead—"

"Oh no—a rope strong enough would be too bulky, Michel must not look suspicious, and besides—"

"But—"

"*Ferme ta gueule*, I say. Besides—eager and foolhardy people might throw themselves on to the box as I dig in the hook and the local train draws out. A steel wire will take the strain better, and besides, a rope might fray and burst. But Michel will wind the other end of that wire round the door-handle, and nothing will be able to stop that box."

"But there is something you have—" I began.

But Jou-Jou would not listen to me. His grip on my arm tightened, and he thrust his blue jowl next to mine.

"Nothing will be able to stop that box—do you hear, friend Hercule? Brave and active *gendarmes* may fling themselves on it as it clatters along the platform, but they will soon drop off. The platform may be smooth, but the

permanent way is hard. And an interfering wheel-tapper, who would just be the kind of man to carry a sharp pair of pliers in his pocket—he will remain just where he is—do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear you all right. But what I am trying——"

"Shut up. I hope you understand. You will find it difficult walking to the pawnbroker with a knife sticking out of your belly, remember that."

"But there is just one thing——"

"Silence, *animal*," he hissed. "You are like an old washerwoman. Just keep your nose out of this, and everything will be all right. I shall jump into the local as it goes out, and the driver will take no notice of police whistles, and stop only when the first signal is against him, which will happen as soon as the *gendarmes* have reached the signal-box. But at that signal we shall have a car waiting. Now good-bye—and remember what I told you."

3

Ah—he was an evil one, that Rat, brutal and violent and headstrong. If only he had let me speak. But no, that was not his way. When Jou-Jou spoke, everyone else had to be quiet.

But afterwards he wished that he had listened to me. Afterwards—when it was too late, perhaps he regretted that he had been so obstinate.

I spent the rest of that day in hollowing out a very small cavity in the top of the handle of my hammer. I also bought chewing-gum, and started to chew, because it said on the packet that it was soothing for the nerves. And I knew that mine needed soothing.

Like most of Jou-Jou's plots, this was a good one. And it was a bold one too. The whole thing was beautifully

timed. How he managed that traffic delay to the exact minute I do not know to this day.

Everything happened just as he said it would.

The party arrived just before the local train was due to draw out. They all hurried along the platform.

Michel threw the hook.

In a flash Jou-Jou had dug it deeply into the wood and leapt on to the footboard as the local train started to move, with the box bumping and clattering along the platform.

You never heard such a noise and a commotion in all your life. Two of the *gendarmes* hurled themselves at the box, and were dragged along trying vainly to release the hook, but they had the sense to let go when they reached the end of the platform.

Poor Michel—it took me a long time to forget that terrible sight. Fortunately the end was quick and merciful—which was perhaps more than he deserved.

You see—that is what I had been trying all along to get into that thick head of Jou-Jou. The men were working there all the time he was speaking to me—but still he would not understand.

They were electrifying the line, and on that Monday the suburban line switched over from steam.

As Michel pulled the box towards him, the hook swung inwards with its weight and banged against the live rail on the side.

There was a sheet of blue flame right up the wire, and the train stopped with a jerk.

And that was the end of Michel. He had learnt many things, no doubt, in his long association with that evil Rat, but he had not learnt how to cope with several thousand volts all at the same time.

4

The box burst open, and I went to help them pick up the jewels which had scattered all over the permanent way.

I found a lot for them—big ones and small ones, too. The foreign gentleman was excited, but very kind. He gave me fifty francs for helping.

In the end they were all found except one diamond. We looked everywhere for that, but it could not be found. We went on looking for hours, but in vain. That one was never found.

The foreign gentleman, considering his blood-pressure, was really most reasonable about it all. And in the end he decided to abandon the search. When everything was considered, he had come out of the whole affair in a remarkably fortunate manner, and out of a whole box of jewels one small diamond was not a great loss, comparatively speaking.

I mean to say, the permanent way is rough and full of flints, and a diamond is a small thing. It is not really surprising, is it? After all, a diamond is a very small thing to hide—I mean to lose.

CHAPTER XII

I

At last my chance came.

I had patience. I was prepared to wait, for I knew that the gods work in their own mysterious and inscrutable ways, and that the unravelling and the weaving of so many threads into a pattern is bound to be a long and tedious process.

But they know what they are doing—ah yes, that is a thing I have always conceded. How else can one explain the inconsistencies and injustices of this wicked world—how else can one face the darkness about each man and see the tide rising ever higher and the gloom growing always greater—without going into a quiet corner and slitting one's throat?

Ah no—it is best to believe that they know what they are doing, those grey ones, and if sometimes they seem slow, it is wise to have patience and to remember that after all they live in an ancient place, and perhaps their methods are a trifle old-fashioned. . . .

I knew that they would not leave such an account as Jou-Jou's unsettled for good. I felt that I was their instrument, but I never knew that I would have to await my opportunity. These things are not decided in a day. There are too many results from one cause—it all makes for complication.

But I possessed myself with patience, and went about my work in peace and dignity, resolving that when my chance came I would prove capable of their trust and confidence, and act in a manner not unworthy of the man they had chosen as their instrument.

2

One afternoon as I sat waiting for the coast train to come in I became aware of a great commotion. A whole regiment of *gendarmes* trooped on to the platform, a cordon was drawn, and the doors of the disused Customs shed were unlocked. The Chief Inspector strutted about like a turkey cock.

I swung my hammer on to my shoulder and walked towards the nearest *gendarme*.

"It is, perhaps, an assassination?" I asked hopefully,

for life becomes dull at times when one does nothing all day but tap wheels.

"No—only a robbery," he replied with a grin.

"Where?"

"On the train—the ruby necklace of the wife of the Swedish Ambassador."

I whistled. That indeed was a robbery. I had heard of that necklace with its fabulous stones, their exquisite matching and perfect graduation.

"But the train does not stop—" I began.

He grinned again.

"Exactly—that is why we are here. That necklace is still there—on the train. We shall get the thief, never fear," he replied triumphantly.

"Unless he threw it out of the window to a confederate," I told him.

"Of that one does not seem to have thought," he muttered.

Well, the train drew in. The *gendarmes* stiffened, and then moved like lightning. Half of them swarmed into the train to search the carriages. Whistles shrilled. The excitement was intense.

All the passengers, protesting greatly, were shepherded into the Customs shed and searched, whether they liked it or not. Most of them did not, and had no hesitation in saying so. But their protests and their indignant complaints were of no avail. That Chief Inspector was a conscientious man.

Nom d'un pipe—what a commotion.

But all that meant nothing to me. I had my work to do. I took my hammer and began to tap the wheels.

As I came to the crowd on the platform, waiting their turn to be searched, I heard voices.

"Ordinary clothes and hat—but with a black mask."

"But how could he—"

"Must have been waiting in the corridor, watching them. She had her maid and a companion with her for most of the journey. But the companion went to reserve places for lunch and the maid went to wash. It was his one opportunity."

"The maid may even have passed him on her way back. Everyone came running when they heard the screams."

"I know. I went myself. If he was clever, he had only to snatch off his mask and pretend that he was one of the first who had come to see what was the matter."

"She can't remember any description which would not fit a dozen—you or I for that matter. Medium height, grey suit, dark hat, glasses—means nothing."

I went on my way.

In spite of all that fuss they found nothing—nothing at all.

They searched every passenger, all the waiters and the cook on the dining-car, the guard, the driver and his fireman, and they ransacked every carriage. But without success.

In the end there was nothing more that they could do. They had to let the people go.

Which they did—some of them angry, vowing vengeance for the inconvenience to which they had been put, some amused, some indifferent—but all of them discussing and talking about the robbery.

3

But I soon had other things to think about.

My hammer struck a wheel, and instead of the usual clang there came a dull click. I struck again, harder—with the same result.

I went on my hands and knees to examine the wheel and to make sure, for I am a conscientious man. I am

paid to tap wheels and I tap them. What they pay me does not affect the issue. The fact that they pay me shamefully and inadequately has nothing to do with it. I accept their pay envelope each week, therefore I accept the contract. It is for me to fulfil my share.

If there were more people with my sense of moral obligation in this world, M'sieu—it would be a better place. But I am digressing.

There was no doubt about it. The wheel was done for. It was a wonder how it had lasted.

I climbed up, took out my notebook to record the number of the coach, and became aware that someone was watching me intently.

He came nearer. I saw that it was Jou-Jou, in a grey suit, a scarf, a dark hat and glasses.

"What are you doing, Hercule?" he asked. "What the devil are you messing about there for—what is it that you have found?"

I sighed. I might have known that he would be in it.

"If you used your ears and your eyes, Jou-Jou," I told him, "and gave your tongue a rest for a change, you would realise that the wheel is flawed."

When I think about it, I shudder at my temerity in addressing him with such rudeness. But I did it deliberately, conquering my fear with a purpose. I wanted to find out what it was all about.

"Kind of an insolent pig," he growled. "Keep a civil tongue in your head—or you will regret it. But what will happen now? What will you do with the coach?"

I had been right. My insolence was already forgotten. He was concerned only with that coach. His anxiety was apparent.

"Well," I told him, "this coach will be shunted off the train and replaced by another one. It would be dangerous to run back to the coast with that wheel."

" But where will the coach go ? "

" Nowhere—until tomorrow. They are very busy at the repair sheds. I should think it will remain on the siding here for a day or two—certainly for tonight."

" You are sure of that ? " he insisted.

" Positive—why should we get excited ? There are plenty more coaches."

" I hope for your sake you have told me the truth, friend Hercule," said Jou-Jou as he turned away.

" I always tell you the truth," I replied. " There was that matter of the picture, if you remember—"

And then I realised that I was talking to myself. So I set to work making out my report.

4

But once my duty was done, and the coach shunted to the siding next to the main line, my ever-active brain began to work feverishly.

Why had Jou-Jou been so interested in the fate of that particular coach ? I began to reason, logically, as is my custom.

And then with a flash of intelligence I saw the whole truth.

Since the robbery had been purely one of opportunity—that is to say, since the thief had been compelled to wait until chance left his victim alone—it was obvious that he could not have had a confederate. He would not have known where to make him wait. Some time before lunch, he might have guessed, but at the speed the train was travelling the risk would have been too great.

He might have thrown his mask out of the window—but certainly not the necklace.

Since the *gendarmes* had searched everyone and found

nothing, the necklace must still be on the train. And in that very coach which was now on the siding, I was certain.

Hence, Jou-Jou's anxiety—I had been talking to the thief himself—the thief who no longer had a confederate he could trust.

He would return. Of that I was certain. I would have to be quick.

M'sieu—I did not hesitate. Mind you, I could have run to the police. That is undoubtedly what I would do today, should a similar circumstance arise.

But then I did not want the police. This was a personal issue, between Jou-Jou and myself. This was my chance to settle some of the debt that was still outstanding.

I saw it all in a flash. I knew just what I had to do. And the first thing was to get hold of that necklace.

I waited until no one was in sight, jumped into the empty train, opened the far door, and made my way to the coach on the siding.

I had a long search, but in the end I found it. And in a very ingenious place, too.

You know those white lace covers they hang on the cushions to absorb gentlemen's hair-oil? Well, behind one of those the cushion had been slit, very cleverly.

I put my finger down and drew out the necklace. I did not delay. In a moment I was back on the line making towards the platform.

When I was in my house I took a small pair of pliers from my pocket and cut off the link holding the smallest ruby, very neatly. Then I hid the necklace under my bed.

I was about to visit that *crapule* Steinemann, the pawn-broker, of whom I have told you before. Therefore,

knowing the gentleman, and remembering the circumstances under which we had last parted, I gave considerable thought and took great pains before my disguise eventually satisfied me.

From my home I took the omnibus to Montmartre, and entered the pawnbroker's shop.

It was just as I remembered it. Just as I had left it, after half throttling its miserable owner. There he was, as old and as dirty as before. This time he was digging the wax from one of his pendulous ears.

"Good-evening," I said.

He looked at me. He dug in his ear. He contemplated his finger-nail with satisfaction. Then he dug in his ear again. But he did not say anything.

He was not what one would call a charming personality, that one. I decided not to waste my time.

"I have here," I said, "a ruby which belonged to a relative of my aunt. Whilst engaged in trying to repair the pendant from which it came he unfortunately broke one of the links—these amateur workmen usually end up by doing something like that. He now wishes me to sell it for him as he is in financial difficulties."

Now I am the first to admit, M'sieu, that this was not a likely tale. But in the first place I had had no time to think up a better one, and in the second, it did not really matter. Indeed, I hoped that he would not believe me, for that was part of my plan.

He looked at the ruby, and he looked at me. Then he took a dirty glass from his pocket and examined it very carefully, holding it up to the light. A piece of wax from his finger-nail fell into the glass, and he shook it out on to the counter, patiently and without anger. He was obviously used to his own dirty habits.

Then he put the glass down and looked at me. Once more he dug into his ear, with a fierce satisfaction.

Then he went to the back of the shop and returned with a pair of scales. He weighed the ruby, very carefully and accurately. Then, once more, he looked up at me.

"Twenty francs," he said.

"Rubbish," I answered.

"Twenty francs," he said again.

"Ridiculous," said I, holding out my hand for the ruby. But he made no attempt to give it to me.

"I said twenty francs," he repeated softly, "and if I were you, M'sieu, I would take them, and moreover, bring the rest of this stolen necklace to me. I will allow you a good price—a very fair price."

Ah—I could have rubbed my hands with satisfaction. This was what I had wanted. This had happened before—all of it. This was what I had counted on happening again.

But none of that did he see in my face. I was the picture of righteous indignation.

I called him all the names I could think of—and some more, too, that I had learnt from Jou-Jou. I told him he was a thief and a robber and a scoundrel and a liar—and as for his twenty francs, I told him what he could do with that, one note at a time.

But it all had no effect. He just stood there quietly and listened while I goaded him, with the ruby still in his hand.

"Very well, M'sieu," he answered, "if you do not wish to do what I advise, I will say good-evening. As soon as you have gone, I shall inform the police of this ruby, which is obviously from the necklace stolen from the Swedish Ambassador's wife this afternoon. I shall also give them a detailed description of yourself."

I drew myself up with dignity as I replied.

"M'sieu—I do not know what you are insinuating. You appear to be a *crapule* of the first class. If you do not wish

to purchase this valuable ruby for a fair price, no doubt someone else will. Good-evening."

I snatched the stone from his hand and walked out of his shop. And once I was out I ran as fast as I could to an omnibus and returned home.

6

There I sat for a long time in profound meditation
So far, so good.

Then I took my pliers and with a piece of fine wire fixed the ruby back again to the necklace.

Then I got up, changed into my overalls, and went back to the station. There was no one on that platform.

Quickly I jumped down on to the line, walked across to the siding, and climbed up into the coach. I had brought my torch with me, and by its light I put the necklace back carefully, exactly where it had been before.

Then I went back and began to tap the wheels of the midnight *rapide* which was standing on the adjacent line.

I did not have long to wait. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jou-Jou sneaking up to the siding.

He got the necklace all right, and walked out of the station—straight into the arms of the *gendarmes* who were waiting for him.

And that was the end of Jou-Jou, for quite a considerable time.

That old pawnbroker must have telephoned to the *gendarmerie*, as I knew he would, immediately after I had left.'

Hercule's smile grew incredibly sly.

' You see, I had put on my Sunday suit, a dark hat and a pair of glasses when I went to see him. I had even rubbed some paint into my chin to make it blue. And I spoke all the time in a harsh and rasping voice.

7

So in the end I paid some of the debt, and I can only hope that the gods realised what I had done and made an entry in the book above on the right side.

Life has taught me many things—some of them in a singularly brutal manner, as if determined that I should learn.

Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that we never cease to learn, a little more each day. The lessons are all about us, waiting to be read. That is why perhaps the gods know best when they consistently prevent me from becoming rich. For were I rich I would retire—I would leave the greatest adventure of all before really knowing anything about it—for this process of learning is unending, and goes on until we die.

From Annette I learnt courage, from Jules I learnt tolerance, and from Jou-Jou I learnt that cunning which I used to encompass his downfall—so perhaps it was not all in vain.'

